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Review Article

W. BRUEGGEMANN

Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy

Fortress, Minneapolis 1997.
£35, \$40

xxi, 777 pages
ISBN 0800630874

The world of OT theology in this century has been dominated by two theologies that have provided the basic paradigms for most others. The first is that of Walter Eichrodt, who sought to find a central concept that summed up the OT world (for Eichrodt, covenant).¹ The second is that of Gerhard von Rad, who organised his work roughly according to the 'historical' narrative of the Bible.² Neither author fully succeeded in his goal, largely because the OT itself resists any final analysis. Indeed, the theologies of Eichrodt and Von Rad remain of value partly because they broke with their controlling idea in order to do more justice to the actual character of the OT. Two of Eichrodt's three volumes treat non-covenantal matters, while Von Rad abandons history for a more systematic treatment at various points.

To these two giants in the land we may possibly now need to add a third.³ Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament* (hereafter *Theology*) is certainly one of the towering works of the 1990s, demonstrating scope, scholarship, originality and a lively style. It displays both continuity with his previous writing and a number of developments. His range of sympathies is characteristically broad. He seeks to develop a rich conversation between academics and theologians, conservatives and liberals, Jews and Christians. He is alive to the contemporary social and theological context in which he writes, and of particular note is his claim that his is the first OT theology that takes account of the challenge of postmodernity. Shunning the modernist ideal of cool, objective summary, Brueggemann's *Theology* is informed by a passion for justice that frequently surfaces. Several review articles have already

1 W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., trans. by J. Baker; SCM, London 1961, 1967.

2 G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols., trans. by D. M. G. Stalker; SCM, London 1975.

3 The opinion also of N. K. Gottwald, 'Rhetorical, Historical, and Ontological Counterpoints in Doing Old Testament Theology', in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, eds T. Linafelt & T. K. Beal, Fortress, Philadelphia 1998, pp 11-23.

been published,⁴ indicating that it is well on its way to becoming a classic. My aim here will be to describe briefly Brueggemann's *Theology*, set it in the context of some of his other writings, and assess its strengths and weaknesses.

Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy

Brueggemann opens with a prologue that consists of two 'retrospects'. In the first Brueggemann reviews the theological and historical-critical roots of the discipline of OT theology, while in the second he discusses the contemporary postmodern interpretive situation, in which pluralism, rhetoric and dialogue are crucial ingredients. Both chapters are consistently illuminating, and chapter 2 in particular introduces some of the themes that will mark his own engagement with the discipline. This introduction is then followed by four substantial sections organised around the key metaphor of the lawcourt. A final section is a broader theological reflection that sets out Brueggemann's vision for the future orientation of OT theology.

The first section of the theology proper begins with 'Israel's core testimony'. The concern is fully theological, centred around an enquiry into the character of the God of Israel. Statements about God are marshalled with the help of an intriguing grammatical classification. Brueggemann begins with verbs, for he is acutely conscious of the danger of static portrayals of God's character. Adjectives come next, with a focus on the 'credo of adjectives' in Exodus 34:6-7. Last come nouns, classified into metaphors of governance and metaphors of sustenance. This bipolar analysis is a characteristic feature of much of Brueggemann's work,⁵ but is here extended in a virtuoso way. Each section ends with a summary and further reflection. For the first this is entitled 'Yahweh fully uttered', and explores the relation between the two main sets of nouns he has analysed.

The second section is possibly the most original aspect of the structure. Certain tensions have been set out in the first part, but it has been largely affirmative and positive. Now, however, Brueggemann explores the hiddenness, ambiguity and negativity of Yahweh. He piles up adjectives that would hardly be found in traditional theologies. 'Yahweh is lordly, haughty, condescending, dismissive, reprimanding' (p. 390). This is the countertestimony that anyone reading the whole of scripture has to take with utmost seriousness, for they prevent safe or triumphalistic theologies that ignore the harsh experiences of real life.

4 The sharpest and most unsympathetic review is undoubtedly J. Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*, SCM, London 1999 pp. 541-62. Other reviews include T. E. Fretheim, 'Some Reflections on Brueggemann's God', in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, eds T. Linafelt & T. K. Beal, Fortress, Philadelphia 1998, pp 24-37; D. E. Gowan, 'Brueggemann's Old Testament Theology: A Review Article', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 20 (1998), pp 89-98; D. T. Olson, 'Biblical Theology as Provisional Monologization: A Dialogue with Childs, Brueggemann and

Bakhtin', *Biblical Interpretation* 6 (1998), pp 162-80; C. Rodd, 'Review of Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*', *Expository Times* 109 (1998), pp 258-61.

5 See his earlier programmatic essays: 'A Shape for Old Testament Theology I: Structure Legitimation II: Embrace of Pain', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985), pp 28-46, 395-415. These are reprinted in *Old Testament Theology: Essays in Structure, Theme, and Text*, Fortress, Minneapolis, MN 1992, pp 1-44.

In the third and fourth parts the structure begins to creak, though probably no more than it does in any other OT theology. It would be difficult to deduce that 'Israel's unsolicited testimony' includes chapters describing how Yahweh partners Israel, the human person, the nations, and creation. The concluding summary of this section is a fine example of Brueggemann's synthesizing gifts as he sets out the common pattern that underlies these relationships, a drama of brokenness and restoration. The fourth part, Israel's embodied testimony, is a study of genre and social setting organised according to the concept of mediation (through the Torah, the king, the prophet, the cult, and the sage).

The copious quotations show how closely Brueggemann desires above all that we engage with the Scriptures. His occasional interaction with the wider theological, ethical and ecclesiastical debate adds rather than detracts from the project, even if we end up disagreeing. Many chapters are outstanding, presenting well-defined discussions of significant topics. Yet for all this, there are some significant questions to ask. Three are about the adequacy of his guiding metaphor, the extent of his assimilation to postmodernity, and the consistency of his theological method.

A metaphorical theology

The lawcourt metaphor is a fine one to choose, for this was *the* primary context for the ancient world to discover the nature of truth, or rather the truthfulness of those under question. Although the way Brueggemann uses it goes well beyond any textual justification, this is not necessarily a weakness, for Brueggemann rightly stresses that all theology requires the exercise of the imagination. However, it was disappointing to find little reflection on the limitations of the metaphor. The relation of the metaphor to the third and fourth major sections is particularly indirect, recalling Eichrodt's difficulty in making 'covenant' more than the beginning of his theology. Further, the lawcourt comes into its own when truth is disputed, but for many of the biblical writings the nature of God and the world is asserted or assumed, not argued. This is particularly true of the Pentateuch. At Sinai there is a declaration, not a dispute. The lawcourt metaphor comes to the fore in the prophets and in the wisdom writings (particularly Job). And it is only in the most extreme and marginal texts that God is put into the dock. But it is the literature of protest and complaint against God that takes an unusually prominent place in the *Theology*.

This point may be developed in conversation with what in my view is one of Brueggemann's most important writings, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education*.⁶ In this book Brueggemann suggested that the Pentateuch set out the foundational elements of Israel's identity through the dominant presence of story and law, the two most authoritative genres. It is only on the basis of this foundation that the prophets are able to dispute practice and belief with people and king. In making the lawcourt central rather than the law, Brueggemann seems to be showing a definite preference for those who shake the foundations rather than

6 *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education*, Fortress, Philadelphia 1982.

lay or maintain them. A recurring theme in Brueggemann's writing is a deep suspicion of the 'royal ideology', adopted by those who use their power to oppress others and recruit to their ends a particular view of God.⁷ This is notwithstanding Brueggemann's own guidelines: 'To choose either mode of testimony to the disregard of the other is in my judgment not only to cheat the testimonial corpus, but to misunderstand the dialectical, resilient, disputatious quality that is definitional for this faith' (p 400). Yet in practice Brueggemann seems to favour the liberal and the revolutionary over the institutional and the status quo. It seems more likely to me that both strands have potential for harm and good, and all depends on the context. Prophets may be false and foolish, just as much as kings may be lazy and idolatrous. The poor are not evidently less sinful than the wealthy, though they may be constrained by more limited opportunity.

It is not so much that what Brueggemann says is mistaken, though Brueggemann does not always explore the historical, social and canonical context of the texts as much as he might. It is more a matter of proportion and emphasis. From a canonical point of view the affirmations are primary, the elements of doubt, ambiguity and negativity secondary. This is indeed reflected in the number of pages that Brueggemann devotes to the testimony in comparison to the countertestimony (196 pp against 98 pp). Brueggemann rightly criticises those who ignore the uncomfortable aspects of the OT, but Brueggemann's own context seems to be pushing him into giving the countertestimony more weight that it should receive.

A Postmodern Theology

One evident development in the *Theology* compared to most of Brueggemann's other writings is an increase in the influence of postmodernity on his interpretive method.⁸ Brueggemann is the most hospitable of dialogue partners. He is willing to listen to a wide range of voices and find something good in them all. But listening and learning from a cultural trend (e.g. postmodernity) is only one model of the way we may engage with culture. To the model of assimilation ('Christ and culture'), we must also add the possibilities of contradiction ('Christ against culture'), and transformation ('Christ through culture').⁹ The danger for Brueggemann is that in his quest for the fresh and the relevant assimilation has become the primary mode of engagement at the expense of criticism.

One example of Brueggemann's postmodern turn is his interest in rhetoric. Attentiveness to this significant dimension of scripture brings many valuable insights, particularly for those who are as committed as Brueggemann to communicating the scriptures. Brueggemann is a renowned preacher as well as scholar and churchman. But in his outworking of this dimension, Brueggemann seems to have sidelined difficult but crucial issues of history and universal truth

7 See 'Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98 (1979), pp 161-85. This is reprinted in *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel's Communal Life*, ed. P.D. Miller, Fortress, Minneapolis, MN 1994, pp 13-42.

8 Particularly *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1993.

9 An adaptation of the typology of H.R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Faber and Faber, London, 1952).

claims. Brueggemann veers uncomfortably between making definite statements about what Yahweh is like, and simply describing the testimony without a clear commitment to the reference of the text. 'Israel assigned to Yahweh, or found within the person of Yahweh, this profound tension' (p 272). Is the testimony evidence that points to God, or merely Israel's opinion? In earlier works Brueggemann has emphasized the need for theologians to take the claims of the text seriously as 'a theological reality mediated through the biblical literature.'¹⁰ But here that reality seems to have retreated behind a textual mirror.

There are complex hermeneutical issues here that Brueggemann does not seem to have resolved. He rightly criticizes historical criticism for claiming a mythical objectivity, but the implication of many of his statements is an equally unsatisfactory subjectivity. Historical criticism regarded every text as a window through which it was possible to discover historical truth. Postmodernity has shown the impossibility of this, but in an opposite reaction has replaced an illusory certainty with an extreme scepticism. A more common-sense approach that mediates between these extremes is surely both necessary and faithful to the biblical texts that show a complex intermingling of theology, history and literary artistry.¹¹ The proportion of this mix depends on many things, including genre and context, and Brueggemann's comments often do not seem to be sufficiently nuanced.

Another key feature of postmodernity is its deep suspicion of metanarratives, which are regarded as inherently totalizing and oppressive. Brueggemann accepted this criticism in *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, and suggested that the church needs to pay attention not so much to the larger picture but to exploring one text at a time. This is what happens in his *Theology*, where many texts are quoted, but often only casually related to each other. The organization is thematic rather than related to the grand narrative set out in the great primary history that proceeds from Genesis to Kings. Of course, this narrative is not such an evident organizing feature in other parts of the OT canon, but Brueggemann himself has argued elsewhere that they contribute secondary and corrective perspectives. Nor is Brueggemann concerned by the historical critics who point out that different parts of this narrative stem from very diverse periods, for he takes a strong canonical approach that focuses on the final form of the text. Yet retelling the story plays little role in the *Theology*. The absence of the grand narrative or a discussion of the wider context in the ancient Near East means that the text tends to become a floating voice, disembodied and divorced from history (however minimally construed).

Lack of attention to such larger framing perspectives also means that Brueggemann can set texts against each other in a way that furthers his rhetoric but does not seem to do justice to the contextual nuancing. For example, the

10 'Biblical Authority in the Post-Critical Period', *Anchor Bible Dictionary* V (1992), pp. 1049-56.

11 See the sophisticated discussions in M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana 1985 and N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, London 1992.

chapter on 'Yahweh and negativity' closes with a discussion of the bleak Psalm 88 (pp 398-99), but it is discussed in isolation from other psalms. Brueggemann himself has shown the importance of reading the laments, the psalms of disorientation, within the context of the canonical Psalter.¹² The Psalter ends on a significant positive note (the psalms of praise in 146-50) that can helpfully be understood as an eschatological affirmation of hope. Brueggemann does discuss Israel's hope at other points, but his structure ensures he treats texts in isolation and so the sense of contradiction is heightened.

The bracketing of the larger narrative movement of the OT is a significant shift from a number of his other writings, where he often follows through the biblical material from the earliest to the latest books.¹³ A further consequence is that this is very much a theology of the OT. Brueggemann does point forward at times to Jesus (usually with great insight), but the structure of his *Theology* does not allow this to be more than a peripheral and an occasional element. In fact, it may be argued that the recovery of a biblical metanarrative may be one of the most significant Christian and biblical responses to the postmodernist challenge.¹⁴

A dialectical theology

Probably the major issue in any biblical theology is how it presents a unified and coherent summary of what the Bible says, yet at the same time does justice to the extraordinary diversity in the various biblical writings. In particular, the OT says many and very different things about God. Traditional explanations might appeal to different sources, traditions and dates. Brueggemann has a horror of harmonization and his explanation of difficulties is distinctively and relentlessly theological. God is both sovereign and compassionate, and these two sides to his character cannot be integrated. 'The tension, oddness, incongruity, contradiction, and lack of settlement are to be understood, not in terms of literature or history, but as the central data of the character of Yahweh' (p 282). This insistence on a God who cannot be captured by one-sided theologies is refreshing. The range of OT statements about God encourage neither the romantics, who would see God only as loving and tolerant, nor Marcion and his heirs, who find in the OT a God of wrath and intolerance. Yet in refusing to succumb to either of these extremes Brueggemann may have run into another kind of problem. Although discussing Israel's counter-testimony regarding God is a fruitful ploy, many of the statements in this section (and elsewhere) seem to be unnecessarily extreme. The lack of adequate contextualization again seems problematic. Despite a nod to the importance of context, he gives the impression that God's action is a matter of

12 E.g. 'Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 50 (1991), pp 63-92. Reprinted in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. P. D. Miller, Fortress, Minneapolis 1995, 189-213.

13 E.g. *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* 1; Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1977; and *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism; Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storyed Universe*, Abingdon, Nashville 1993.

14 See R. Middleton & B. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*, SPCK, London 1995.

arbitrary play (a characteristic postmodern emphasis). But how far is it possible within the larger biblical framework to describe God as negligent, irascible, abusive, contradictory and unreliable? There are, indeed, texts that might imply these things, but only if they are isolated from more foundational texts that assert God's goodness and good will for all that he has made. A better theology would have emerged, I believe, if the testimony and counter-testimony had been allowed to interact more dynamically.

If Brueggemann is at times in danger of allowing texts to talk past each other, he can also cut the conversation off short. An example is his intriguing discussion of the Pentateuchal traditions that explore the nature of Yahweh's command at Sinai. According to Brueggemann, on the one hand we have the strand that emphasizes holiness (especially Leviticus); on the other side Deuteronomy emphasizes justice. Brueggemann starts by emphasizing the value of both these traditions, but Brueggemann is disturbed by the way homosexuality is strongly condemned in the holiness tradition. So although he begins by emphasizing the value of the holiness (or purity) trajectory, all too quickly it is announced that 'the justice trajectory has decisively and irreversibly defeated the purity trajectory' (p 196). It seems clear to me that the strands cannot be as clearly distinguished as Brueggemann assumes, for the same texts refer to both holiness and justice (e.g. Lev. 19). In my judgement Brueggemann has abandoned prematurely his own dialectical method. It may be significant that when Brueggemann does come down decisively, his views echo those of American liberalism.¹⁵

Another crucial issue for a theology of the *Old Testament* is how Yahweh the God of Israel is related to the God and Father of Jesus Christ revealed in the NT. In his writing Brueggemann is very alert to the fact that the Hebrew Bible is claimed by the Jewish community as its own scriptures. At a number of points he sharply criticises supersessionism (the view that Christianity has replaced Judaism). But it is not clear how he reads the awkward NT texts that assert the primacy of Jesus Christ. Further, he uses the term supersessionism in a very general and polemical way. One problem with Brueggemann's rhetoric is that it is sometimes uncertain what he means, and how seriously we are to take it. It also makes it difficult to explore nuanced positions in between the extreme views he rightly condemns as inadequate.

Conclusion

How serious are these flaws in Brueggemann's *Theology*? The lawcourt metaphor is inadequate, but so is every other central idea or guiding structure so far proposed.

15 A few indications of Brueggemann's personal background are evident in his 'A Response to J. Richard Middleton', *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994), pp 279-89. See also V. S. Parrish, 'Brueggemann, Walter', in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, eds D. McKim, IVP, Leicester 1998, pp 570-75.

A broader appreciation of law, particularly in the Pentateuch, would widen the metaphor and include much that is only very indirectly related to the image (especially in the fourth section). Brueggemann's assimilation of postmodernity is more worrying. Barr's assessment is unequivocal: 'Brueggemann seems to stand for a total surrender to the post-modern *Zeitgeist*.'¹⁶ However, it can be argued that postmodernity only surfaces at certain points, and (fortunately) has not been fully assimilated. Recovering the fundamental significance of the metanarrative could allow him to integrate much that is found in later chapters (e.g. the third section). As for Brueggemann's dialectical approach, it is an enormously powerful method of bringing texts into a fruitful conversation. My criticism is that he does not follow through his own method rigorously enough.

Yet for what there is in the *Theology* we must be deeply grateful, and I consider that its merits outweigh its drawbacks. Practically every page will provide some insight that will illuminate the scriptures and help them to become a word of the Lord for today. I hope that many will read it (critically, of course) and use it to enrich and inform their preaching, teaching and worship. And, unlike von Rad and Eichrodt, Brueggemann is still very much with us. Let us hope he finds the energy and time to respond to his critics and bring out a second edition.¹⁷

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P. S. Towards a second edition:

- (1) The lack of a subject index is nothing less than scandalous. If anyone with time on their hands could produce one, it would be greatly appreciated!
- (2) The book's presentation is attractive, the referencing representative, judicious and generally accurate. However, perhaps I may be excused in pointing out that p 192 footnote 82 should read Philip P. Jenson, not Philip P. Janzen (nor, as the index would have it, Phillip Janzen!).

¹⁶ Barr, *Biblical Theology*, p 557.

¹⁷ See for an initial response 'Theology of the Old Testament: A Prompt Retrospect', in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, eds T. Linafelt & T. K. Beal, Fortress, Philadelphia 1998, pp 307-20.