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An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination

Walter Brueggemann

Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003

434 pages, \$24.95 Softcover

Were one to support the Old Testament as more ideology than credible historical reportage, one would welcome this Introduction to the books of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible with open arms. Currently theological intentionality of biblical texts stands as more important than the question of their historicity. So-called “historical” data within the Old Testament is increasingly taken as simply unreliable, or at least improvable and often unlikely.

Biblical texts are therefore better examined for their ideological freight. To quote Brueggemann: “The Bible is never simply reportage and description, but is always interpretive commentary that pushes upon the observable to the constructed, that is, *imagination* beyond the ‘given’” (395). While Brueggemann has never subscribed to the specific interpretive outcomes of Brevard Childs (Yale), one must confess that in this book he has mimicked to a remarkable degree Childs’s own focus-on-the-end approach. It appears that Brueggemann has taken to heart recurrent criticism Childs has directed his way (cf. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*, 2004, pp. 292-296).

Throughout the book, there are numerous insightful quotations from a wide range of Christian and Jewish authors. Readers will appreciate access to the rich bibliography supplied of 357 works consulted. Brueggemann’s own span of 20 books/articles in the list indicates his creative capacity to write a book such as this one.

The plan of ideological exposition (402 pages) unfolds according to the Hebrew MT canon: Torah, Prophets, and Writings. Each of the three primary units is introduced, expounded book by book, then summarized. “A Concluding Reflection” balances the book’s “Introduction: Imaginative Remembering.”

Brueggemann’s overall “canonical” approach is both inviting and moderately successful. Most rewarding is his presentation of the Torah and Former Prophets, in its detailing of the contrast between the Priestly and Deuteronomic ideologies. The presentation of the major prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel fares better

than the Book of the Twelve as a canonical unity, where the author must admit in his reprise on the Prophets: "... scholars are not inclined to consider the Twelve as one canonical statement. Such explorations are only at the beginning, and more work remains to be done" (266). Brueggemann himself characterizes the Twelve as "a rolling corpus," i.e., a tradition that has developed in fresh interpretive directions over time to make ongoing interpretive responses to new circumstances.

Ideologically speaking, whereas the Torah bespeaks obedience, the Prophets invite hope. Brueggemann sees strong, ideological links between Ezekiel and the Priestly tradition, Jeremiah and the Deuteronomic tradition, and Isaiah with the J tradition. Critically, more emphasis might have been given to the faith/trust dimension in the Book of Isaiah, particularly in the coverage of Isaiah's "oracles against the nations." While it is proper to stress YHWH's "sovereignty over the nations," Isaiah's "nations" are better noted for what they were: deceitful, false alternatives to the true security and deliverance of YHWH.

Falling as it does outside the Law and the Prophets is the more pluralistic and elusive unit called the Writings. Brueggemann's reflections on the Psalms, Proverbs, and Job herein are quite satisfactory. Less so are some of the remaining books. So much credence given to the erotic dimension of YHWH's relation to Israel in the Song of Songs might not suit every reader (326-328). Likewise, Brueggemann's general, a-historical approach should not have precluded any comment whatsoever on Daniel 11, with its coded panorama of historical personages and events from Cambyses to Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Nor need Ecclesiastes be read as so recklessly and fatalistically skeptical, since the book serves more as a warning to subsequent readers to be wary of pontificating theologians who know all the answers. Its bottom line is to advocate working with what is seen and known, not speculating beyond such, and above all, enjoying God's good gifts here and now before old age sets in. When the final verses of Ecclesiastes (12:13-14) provide a legitimate clue for a canonical reading of the entire book ["All has been heard, keep the Torah"], one smiles to observe that here Brueggemann refuses to follow through on his own new-found methodology: "... it is my judgment that such canonical closure to the book must not be permitted to silence the troubled restlessness given in the rest of the material" (333).

Nonetheless, one will certainly appreciate the contemporary message for the church in the exposition of the books of Esther and Daniel. Esther, the most uncompromising Jewish book in the canon (Luther hated it!), and the Book of Daniel with its sanctioned resistance and apocalyptic outlook, are noted as heedful articulations, in concretely Jewish terms, of how God's own must engage from time to time in the daring task of preserving their distinctiveness in the face of increasingly hostile secularities. To his credit, due attention is also given throughout the book to the different, interpretive outcomes conditioned by Jewish and Christian canonical book-locations and expansions.

Although the author is committed personally to a Christian perspective, the book is sensitive to Jewish perspectives. "This in no way compromises claims made in Christian faith, but intends to eschew any monopolistic reading that crowds out a Jewish reading that is likewise faithful to the text and is to be taken with equal seriousness" (2). Brueggemann insists that Christian faith and Christian reading of the New Testament cannot commence without the Old, yet likewise cannot tolerate any notion of testamental supersessionism. On the other hand, the author does not shy away from the morality of some of the harsh ideologies advocated within the Hebrew Scriptures, such as in his exposition of the genocide and land claims advocated in the Book of Joshua, the calls for radical xenophobic obedience within the Pentateuch, or the principles of exclusion and exclusiveness present in post-exilic Ezra-Nehemiah.

Walter Brueggemann is currently professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia. Ever at war with a culture of militant consumerism, he writes out of the Calvinist and United Church tradition, with a compelling interest (in the spirit of Norman Gottwald) in issues of justice and liberation. In this publication, he acknowledges his ongoing creative debt to Paul Ricoeur for such insights as "limit expression," "metaphorisation," "plurality of interpretation," and especially the "hermeneutics of testimony" (275, 325). Brueggemann's writing style is very true to his literary past, with numerous Brueggemannisms ("construal," "situate," "imaginative/imagination") and pithy expressions ("love-hate relationship," "old age is not for wimps," "better to be red than dead," "Persian connection," and "purity system").

A subsequent edition might address the following typos: “capitol” (238), “antineighborly”(242), “antihuman” (353), “the distinctions ... is” (275) and the all too familiar, tautologous phrase “common consensus” (1, 3x). In the Index on Names (431-434): the page location for citation of poet “Yeats” should be page 283; Scott, James M.” should follow “Scott, J(ames) C.” and the names cited corrected to Moberly, R.W.L.,” “Soulen, R. Kendall” (433) and “Wybrow, Cameron” (434). Page 244 should be added to the page citations given for both Luther and Calvin (432). Also “Hill, John, 179” and “Herodotus, 179” should be added to page 432, as well as “Rosenberg, David, xii” to p.433.

In short, the book is a bold attempt to decipher the theological, ideological code underlying the instruction, prophecy, wisdom, narrative, poetry, and apocalyptic of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. One wonders to what degree this particular publication, a milestone in a lifetime of biblical study, if methodologically insightful and correct, does not ultimately undermine, if not negate, the validity of most, if not all, of Brueggemann’s previous historical-critical published work.

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Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective

Anthony R. Ceresko

Revised and updated edition. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001
 384 pages, \$25.00 Softcover

The first *Introduction* (1992) grew out of the author’s experience of teaching an Old Testament survey course at St. Michael’s College in Toronto. The goal was to make available to a larger audience the results of Norman K. Gottwald’s work on the origins and religion of ancient Israel. This updated edition follows upon almost nine more years of teaching OT at St. Peter’s Pontifical Institute, Bangalore, India. A.R. Ceresko, O.S.F.S, now teaches at the Divine Word Seminary in Tagaytay City, Philippines.