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# A social reading of the Old Testament: prophetic approaches to Israel's communal life

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argument which Paul uses to defend his central conviction (Christ as saviour of all on equal terms) against objections raised from Jewish or Jewish Christian quarters. While Barrett is well aware of this development (e.g., p. 83), he tends to give it short shrift, continuing to see justification by faith as central to Paul (indeed, to Christian existence itself; see pp. 174-175), and opposition to legalistic religion as the substance of his "works" language. Readers' appreciation of this aspect of Barrett's book will vary, of course, according to where they hang their theological hats.

The book concludes with two shorter chapters, one dealing with "the sequel" to Paul's thought in the six disputed letters, the other containing brief but incisive observations about the significance of Paul for today. These chapters round out what can only be described as a superlative introduction, one that will in its own way help to ensure Paul's ongoing significance for today.

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## **A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel's Communal Life**

Walter Brueggemann  
Edited by Patrick D. Miller  
Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994  
328 pp.

*A Social Reading of the Old Testament* is a collection of fifteen previously published essays by one of the most accessible Old Testament teachers, Walter Brueggemann. In his erudite and yet lucid manner, Brueggemann encourages a social reading of the text which simultaneously challenges contemporary society and reveals new avenues of possibility.

The essays in *A Social Reading* are grouped into three sections. The three essays of Part I, Guidelines and Approaches, are programmatic. In "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel", Brueggemann traces two competing trajectories in the Old Testament, the royal (Davidic) trajectory which presents God as faithfully supporting the powers that be, and the liberation (Mosaic) trajectory which supports societal have-nots.

It becomes soon evident that Brueggemann is clearly more comfortable with the liberation stream. Indeed, the two other essays of Part I, "Covenant as a Subversive Paradigm", and "Covenant as Social Possibility", deal with covenant clearly from the Mosaic point of view.

Covenant for Brueggemann is more than a theological construct. To enter into a covenant relationship with God affects the whole realm of society,

political and social. Members of the covenant community will be characterized by justice, freedom, abundance, and compassion and will strive to transform the whole of society to reflect the same.

Part II, *A Social Reading of Particular Texts*, and Part III, *A Social Reading of Particular Readings*, are comprised of a series of four and eight essays respectively which demonstrate the practicableness of Brueggemann's theory.

Part II essays include, "Social Criticism and Social Vision in the Deuteronomic Formula of the Judges", "'Vine and Fig Tree': A Case Study in Imagination and Criticism", "At the Mercy of Babylon: A Subversive Rereading of the Empire", and "A Poem of Summons (Isaiah 55:1-3) and a Narrative Resistance (Daniel 1)".

Part III essays are, "Israel's Social Criticism and Yahweh's Sexuality", "Theodicy in a Social Dimension", "The Social Nature of the Biblical Text for Preaching", "The Prophet as a Destabilizing Presence", "The Social Significance of Solomon as a Patron of Wisdom", "Rethinking Church Models through Scripture", "Reflections on Biblical Understandings of Property", and "Revelation and Violence: A Study in Contextualization".

I offer several quotations to pique your interest. In "The Social Nature of the Biblical Text for Preaching", Brueggemann argues that preachers are world makers: "An evangelical understanding of reality asserts... that all of our presumed givens are provisional and open to newness, a newness that may be enacted in the act of preaching" (p. 218).

In the apropos study "Rethinking Church Models through Scripture", Brueggemann asserts, "What must survive is an alternative community with an alternative memory and an alternative social perception rooted in a peculiar text, identified by a peculiar genealogy, and signed by peculiar sacraments, a community of peculiar people not excessively beholden to the empire and not lusting after domestication into the empire" (p. 274).

*A Social Reading of the Old Testament* with its wide range of texts and topics is ideal for discussion groups, and is a must read for pastors, who regularly engage in interpretation of both text and society.

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## **Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament**

Trevor Dennis

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994

ix + 197 pp.

"Meaning is not to be found, so much as created," writes Trevor Dennis in the introduction to his book. This is what the book attempts to do. It