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### The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word

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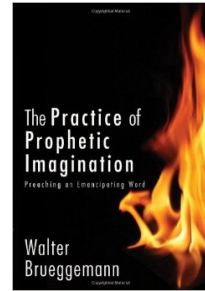
## Book Review

### **The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word**

by Walter Brueggemann

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012.

Since its debut in 1978, Walter Brueggeman's classic work *The Prophetic Imagination* has remained a relevant and seminal work for those interested in Old Testament scholarship or prophetic proclamation. *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, a follow up nearly 25 years in the making furthers Brueggeman's thought by emphasizing the connection between the prophetic texts of the Old Testament and the art of prophetic preaching today. For Brueggeman, the task for both the Ancient Israelite prophets and contemporary prophetic preachers is to help their hearers "imagine the world as though YHWH...is a real character and decisive agent in the world" (45). Though not a guide to the formation of prophetic sermons Brueggeman does have contemporary preachers in mind as a part of this book's audience. This work offers a robust description of the work of Old Testament prophets and contemporary preachers that would assist preachers and pastors who have to regular craft prophetic sermons, a practice that Brueggeman admits can be vulnerable and difficult for pastors.



For Brueggeman prophetic proclamation is an act of storytelling. The prophet's task is to tell the story of YHWH in such a way that it is imaginable over and above the dominate narrative of the day. Chapter 1 of this work gives an in depth view of the ways in which Brueggeman views the prophetic work as a primarily narrative exercise. The difficult task of prophetic preaching is an unveiling of the tension that exist between the dominant story of the world and the story of YHWH (18). Brueggeman suggests that the prophetic task names the crisis that already exists in the lives of the hearers and then seeks to offer an alternative option.

Reflecting back on what he describes as a "happenstance" title from his previous work, Chapter 2 provides an examination of Brueggeman's concept of imagination. Contemporary prophetic preaching is then an act of imagination rooted in the already existent acts of imagination found in the writings of the biblical prophets (23). Contemporary prophets evoke images of reality initiated outside of our present reality in the minds of their hearers (25). Brueggeman asserts that the prophets of old used poetic language to both negate the dominate imagination of the time as well as to construct a new reality for the hearers where YHWH is the central agent (29). Chapter three begins by naming the way that loss is imagined by Old Testament prophets as Divine Judgment. Brueggeman then calls contemporary prophetic preachers to show their hearers that loss is theologically meaningful, and to "foster a narrative in which loss makes sense" (60). Chapter four broadens the discussion of judgment to include God's resolution to restore Israel. The prophet's storytelling work thus also includes the work of helping people move through loss to new possibility (96).

Describing the prophet's work of telling a story of new hope beyond loss is taken up in Chapter five. In this chapter Brueggeman displays how the prophets spoke words of life

and restoration to a community that had found themselves out of sync with God's covenantal arrangement (101). Here Brueggeman demonstrates his mastery of the Old Testament prophetic literature by highlighting this move for hope in a wide variety of prophetic passages before finally pointing out the call to new hope in the life and ministry of Jesus. For Brueggeman, "the preacher is an agent of 'Bursts of Newness,'" the individual charged with giving utterance to the newness that God is up to in the world (128).

The final chapter serves as a summation of the arguments of the book. Brueggemann suggests that the church has a tacit yearning for the prophetic that needs to be satiated by contemporary prophetic preachers. He makes a call for an imaginative work that is not prediction or strictly social justice messages, but the work of imaging YHWH into this world (132). The prophet is ultimately a bearer of good news, as she or he must help the community relinquish a world that is passing away while making way for a new order that is to come.

Those looking for a homiletical instruction book on prophetic preaching would be unsatisfied with this work but those that regular labor as prophetic proclaimers may feel a great sense of solidarity and affirmation in this text. Moving in between analysis of Old Testament scripture and a thick description of his perception of the contemporary condition, Brueggemann does a masterful job of describing a contemporary vision of prophetic preaching that is birthed from the work of ancient Israelite prophets. A few sample sermons would have helped form Brueggemann's vision for prophetic preaching in the minds of the readers. Nonetheless, *The Practice of Prophetic Preaching* offer a meaningful elaboration of Brueggeman's thought and is a must purchase for Old Testament scholars and prophetic preachers alike.

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