Brueggemann, Walter

Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy


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This new edition of Brueggemann’s instant classic contains an unaltered text of the original 1997 edition but is different in two important ways. First, it is in paperback, with the price reduced by about one-third. Second, it is accompanied by a CD-ROM, which contains the full text of the book plus a study guide prepared by Rebecca J. Kruger Gaudino. At least four thoughtful and thorough reviews of Theology of the Old Testament appeared in RBL following the initial publication (http://bookreviews.org/bookdetail.asp?TitleId=76&CodePage=366,76). RBL also published Brueggemann’s response to most of these reviews. Therefore, this review will address three specific issues rather than producing a general review of the book. First, I will reflect upon my experience using this book twice as a textbook when teaching courses in Old Testament theology. Second, I will evaluate the usefulness of the CD-ROM. Third, I will attempt to gauge the impact of Brueggemann’s work on the subsequent eight years in the field of Old Testament theology.

In 2002 and 2004 I used this book as the primary text in undergraduate courses called “Old Testament Theology.” In each case I assigned students to read about three-fourths of the book, forgoing “Part III: Israel’s Unsolicited Testimony.” I also assigned students to read Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek alongside Brueggemann’s work.
Dillard’s work provides a powerful reflection on one of Brueggemann’s favorite ideas, “place,” that is also thoroughly infused with biblical thought in obvious and subtle ways. *Pilgrim* provides an excellent conversation partner for students to use to produce their own journals as they move through the course. Those familiar with the Brueggemann’s book will be aware of the enormous accomplishments and difficulties of the two introductory chapters that open it. In them Brueggemann provides an astonishing, two-part retrospective of the field of Old Testament theology, from the Reformation to the middle of the 1990s, in a dense and breathless 114 pages. My students needed a fair amount of comfort and encouragement to get through this section. I typically assigned only ten to twenty pages per class meeting. Undergraduate students routinely respond to this section by saying things such as, “I had to read this with my dictionary on my lap.” This is unavoidable, however, because the economy of language that made such a concise review of the subject possible required the use of a specialized and intense vocabulary. Some students even begin to find humor in Brueggemann’s repeated use of words such as *hegemonic, dialogical*, and *reductionist* and his relentless use of a variety of forms of the word *odd*. I found it helpful to play along and use this humor for its pedagogical advantages. By the time students waded through these introductory chapters, most expressed both an immense feeling of satisfaction and a growing sense that they were actually beginning to grasp what Brueggemann was saying. I encouraged them to read these pages a second time, emphasizing how much I gained by my own fourth and fifth readings of them, and some students actually did it. As class discussions proceeded, I also found that students managed to internalize the vocabulary so that they had the language tools to talk about this complex field of study.

At the beginning of “Part I: Israel’s Core Testimony,” most students found themselves on firmer footing. Brueggemann’s method, based upon the grammatical movement from verbs to adjectives to nouns, was understandable to them. It provided a method they could use for themselves. The notion of core testimony and counter testimony then provided a useful framework for carrying out the grammatical method. As a midterm examination, I had students do two things in a “take-home” essay. First, they were to summarize the introductory chapters in 1,500–2,000 words, then choose a particular topic to approach theologically using the Old Testament. They then produced another 1,500–2,000 words on this topic, following Brueggemann’s grammatical approach, looking for how God is presented in verbal sentences related to this topic, followed by an examination of adjectival constructions and noun formations (metaphors). Some students wrote good papers on subjects such as grief, ethnicity, gender identity, and geography in the Old Testament. They were usually successful in distinguishing “core testimony” from “counter testimony” related to this topic.
The final exam essay in the course was not as closely tied to Brueggemann’s book or his approach but was still related. In the first half of the paper, students were to summarize the current state of Old Testament theology. “Part V: Prospects for Theological Interpretation,” provided an excellent starting point here. Following this summary, they chose a specific text and answered a two-directional question. How does this text participate in the theology of the Old Testament, and what can a theology of the Old Testament provide to help interpret this text? Students were encouraged to connect their text to “Part IV: Israel’s Embodied Testimony,” which is an excellent discussion of how faith is mediated through human structures, institutions, and social patterns. This provided another opportunity for them to think beyond narrow exegesis toward the larger theological horizons of the Old Testament. While Brueggemann’s text would obviously work better in a course for graduate students, it is still far more than usable in an undergraduate context. The struggle and confusion it elicits for both student and teacher help form a fitting pedagogy for this most challenging subject.

The CD-ROM that accompanies the paperback edition contains three significant resources: *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, a study guide for this book, and the full text of Brueggemann’s 1993 work, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*. These electronic resources are supported by a program called the Libronix Digital Library System (LDLS). Once this system is loaded onto a computer, the three resources on this particular CD-ROM can either be copied onto the hard drive of the computer or retrieved for each use from the CD-ROM. The LDLS material provides information on the many other texts available in this format, which allows users to begin building electronic libraries on their own computers. Among the advantages of LDLS are its search capability, highlighting and note-taking functions, its ability to export passages into word-processing programs, and automatic footnote creation. For an older user with mediocre technical skills, these features were initially confusing to use but became manageable with practice. On the other hand, they seem to fit the naturally developed technical skills of the current generation of students very well. As a teaching tool, the electronic text of the book provides the capacity to project passages from the book in the classroom, when the necessary technology is available, alleviating the need for all of the students to bring the book to class. Of course, students with laptop computers can have their own electronic text with them.

The *Theology of the Old Testament Study Guide* provides a summary of each chapter of about five hundred words in length, a set of five to seven discussion and reflection questions for each chapter, and occasional hyper-links to Web resources, including numerous articles by Brueggemann for publications such as *Theology Today*. The study guide contains frequent quotations from the book. Placing the cursor on the footnote number provides a pop-up screen containing the full page from which the citation is.
taken. Clicking on the number moves the user to the book itself in the main window. I was a little puzzled about how to move back to the study guide but was able to do so with a few trial-and-error attempts. As with all such “helps,” there is some tension between the desire to make the text easy for students to use and the need for them to struggle through the learning process themselves. The outcome is likely not the same for all students, depending on their abilities and learning styles. As long as classroom discussions are intensive and rigorously evaluated, students will not be able to replace careful reading of the book with a quick reading of the summaries in the study guide.

Finally, Brueggemann’s work is nearing the end of its first decade of service to our field, so some evaluation of its place is in order. It is important to recognize that, chronologically, this work lies squarely between the two fine works by Leo G. Perdue: *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (1994) and *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (2005). Both of these volumes appear in the Overtures to Biblical Theology series edited by Brueggemann, who pays appropriate homage to the former work as a major force in shaping his thought. In the other direction, surely no other single work contributes more than Brueggemann’s to the possibilities involved in the reversal of title and subtitle in Perdue’s two books. A number of other important works in the field have also appeared during this time frame. James Barr’s *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (1999) provides a more detailed analysis of the history and development of Old Testament theology, but it does not attempt to construct a thorough theology of its own. John Goldingay’s *Old Testament Theology: Israel’s Gospel* (2003) constructs its own complete, narrative theology of the Old Testament, but without as thorough a discussion of the development and status of the field of Old Testament theology. As its title suggests, Bernhard W. Anderson’s *Contours of Biblical Theology* (1999) takes a more introductory approach to topical concerns, not yet fully abandoning the notion of covenant as a *mitte* for Old Testament theology. Thus, Brueggemann’s *Theology of the Old Testament* continues to inhabit the most prominent position in the field. In a new preface, primarily in response to canonical and historicist critiques, Brueggemann asserts that “the main pattern of dialogical, multi-voiced testimony continues to be, I am persuaded, exactly in the right direction.” This new edition will serve only to increase the accessibility and usefulness of his work as introduction, guide, and model for all who are interested in the field of Old Testament theology.