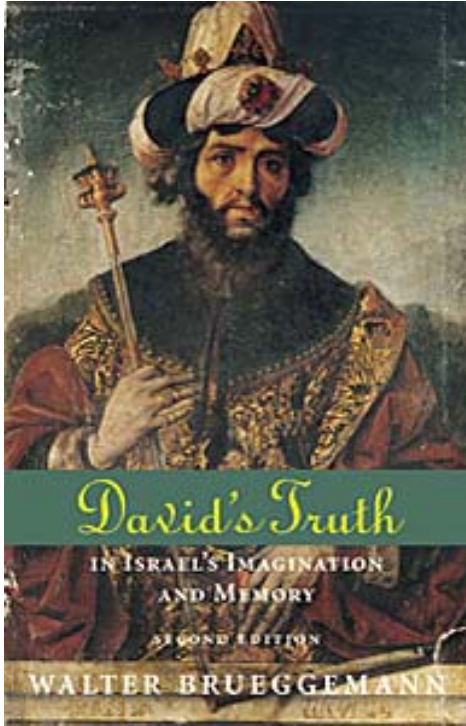


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Brueggemann, Walter

David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory

2d edition

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This second edition of Brueggemann's *David's Truth* seeks, as the original did, to discern "the disclosure of reality that clusters around the person of David" (117). Brueggemann's interest is not in facticity but in worldview, in operative convictions about human life and faith. He asks how the biblical literature makes theological claims that are relevant to particular social contexts. Although the closing chapter offers a tentative suggestion that the ability to "receive and relinquish with some graciousness" (115) characterizes David in all strands of the tradition, Brueggemann is far more concerned with elucidating the diversity of the David traditions than with constructing a unified picture of David. While details of the discussion have changed, Brueggemann maintains the basic thrusts of his 1985 edition. In 1 Sam 16:1–2 Sam 5:5 we find "The Trustful Truth of the Tribe," in 2 Sam 9–20 and 1 Kgs 1–2 "The Painful Truth of the Man," in 2 Sam 5:6–8:18 "The Sure Truth of the State," and in Pss 89; 132, Lam 3:21–27; Isa 55:3; and 1 Chr 10–29 "The Hopeful Truth of the Assembly."

In this new edition Brueggemann comments that in the original edition of this book he was turning from a primarily historical-critical approach toward a more rhetorical and sociological perspective (xi). Since then, Brueggemann and other Hebrew Bible scholars have continued to explore literary and sociological approaches, so readers familiar with contemporary scholarship are unlikely to be startled by *David's Truth* (although they may relish its clarity and forcefulness). For students and lay readers who are less aware of the Bible's ideological diversity, Brueggemann's accessible and persuasive presentation will probably continue to have a paradigm-shaking impact.

Brueggemann's method is deeply informed by the results of historical-critical inquiry, but its main thrusts are literary and theological. The book is packed with observations about literary features (such as framing elements, key words, and especially the details used to characterize various actors) of the final form of the narrative. Brueggemann is also (as usual) generous with theological commentary, and I suspect that many a sermon in coming years will feature quotations from his discussion.

As one might guess from the chapter titles quoted above, Brueggemann uses a great deal of sociological language. His assertions about sociological contexts bear a discernible relationship to "consensus" opinions on the history of the literature (insofar as consensus opinions still exist), but he does not offer his readers much explanation of the particular contexts or his reasons for asserting them. The chapter on "The Painful Truth of the Man" is particularly vague about context, asserting that it is somewhere between tribe and state (38), leaving me uncertain as to whether this is to be taken in an ideological sense, a temporal one (and what would that mean, given Brueggemann's statement that "tribal" literature is not necessarily prestate [10]?), or both. Brueggemann appeals to Gottwald in his definitions of tribe ("a social model of egalitarianism") and state ("a monopoly of the means of production and the concentration of social power in the hands of a ruling elite"). The assembly, he tells us, is a religious, as distinct from political, community, "which has no ground to hope for political preeminence but can realistically be a community of faithful practice and anticipation" (63, 88). These models refer less to particular ancient social structures than to broad ideal types. They serve a theology of God's preferential option for the marginal, a theology that regards tribe and assembly very positively and the state with, at best, wary suspicion.

Brueggemann's prescriptive use of sociological rhetoric is not inappropriate for an author "relentlessly preoccupied with the work of these texts in a believing congregation" (xv). One of the great strengths of Brueggemann's work is that "it preaches." Still, I wish that he had more carefully differentiated assertions about ideal types from what sound like statements about actual communities and their texts. For instance, on page 111 he tells us that the assembly's truth "does not engage in political calculation or strategy." He does

not tell us how to square this with the increasing amount of research locating much of this “assembly” literature—however politically ingenuous it may seem—amidst bitter factional power struggles within the province of Yehud. As another example, on page 9 Brueggemann says that his “trustful truth of the tribe” theme for the story of David’s rise “indicates not only why it was told but how it was heard.” This sounds like a historical claim about the attitude of the tellers and hearers. Elsewhere we read that “the tribe really believed its narrative, and it took it uncritically” (68), another apparently historical claim. About the “tribal” text itself (1 Sam 16–2 Sam 5:5), Brueggemann says “all are agreed” that these narratives are “uncritical” and “naively enthusiastic” for David (10). Yet earlier in the same paragraph (10), Brueggemann has reported that scholars describe the intent of the “tribal” narrative with such terms as “a statement of legitimation for this man and dynasty,” “apology,” and “glorification and propaganda.” Are these really “naively enthusiastic” genres? The writers promote David, but they seem well aware that his story needs spin-doctoring. Nor is it clear to me that the hearers of the narrative were uncritical: the strident insistence on David’s innocence with regard to Abner’s assassination (2 Sam 2–3), for instance, suggests widespread doubts about that innocence. Perhaps the narrators seek to engender an uncritical and naively enthusiastic embrace of David, but it does not follow that either narrators or readers actually had such an attitude.

One may also ask if even the values promoted are consistently “tribal.” The tribe’s trustful truth, we are told, is countercultural, rejecting the virtues of social gentility and courtly propriety (10). On this point Brueggemann cites Mendenhall’s discussion of David’s refusals to kill Saul in 1 Sam 24 and 26 (11). But while one can read these chapters in counterestablishment fashion, one can at least as easily read them (and many have done so) as defense of David and promotion of his anointed inviolability by narrators in the service of an enthroned David—hardly ideology “standing apart from and over against the regimentation and legitimation of the state” (10). Brueggemann does note that the “outsider” hero of the stories has become the “insider” by the time these tellings are done (see esp. 12–13), but I do not think he digs deeply enough into the implications. How much of the trustfulness of Brueggemann’s tribal truth lies in the literature or its tellers/hearers, and how much in Brueggemann’s own conviction that such trustfulness is “how it [the story of David’s rise] must be told and heard now if we are to honor it and take it seriously” (9, in contrast to his conviction that the truth of the state is cynical, distorted, and distorting [68])?

Brueggemann’s tendency to clothe his prescriptive enthusiasm for the “tribe” in the language of descriptive assertion struck me especially in the discussion of 2 Sam 8:13’s statement that “David made a name for himself.” Brueggemann tells us that “the old tribal chieftains would have been incapable of such a moment of self-congratulations” (80). This is remarkably optimistic. I suspect Brueggemann means that tribal ideology

prohibits such claims, not that real chieftains were incapable of making them. But, as he himself points out (noting the tension between 2 Sam 8:13 and 2 Sam 7), the biblical ideology of kingship likewise prescribes against such claims. I have two concerns here: first, that Brueggemann seems to be playing the ideals of the tribal model against the practice of an actual state; second, that his phrasing encourages the unwary reader to think of the tribal period as a historical golden age of social/theological purity rather than a period in which, as at other times, ideals were often honored in the breach rather than the observance. The reference to “old” tribal chieftains also rings oddly against his several statements that “tribal” thinking has to do with marginal status and does not necessarily imply an early date.

The original edition of *David's Truth* was an important call to value the diversity of the David traditions and to appreciate their various social/theological functions. This new edition, informed by intervening years of research by Brueggemann and others, preserves and improves upon the strengths of that original. But it is as surely an ideological enterprise as the literature it discusses (a point I think Brueggemann would probably grant). I hope it will be read with “awareness of conflicting voices and competing truths” (xv), an awareness to which Brueggemann himself exhorts us.