Brueggemann, Walter

Worship in Ancient Israel: An Essential Guide


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This compact, new textbook is one of a series of well-written and informative Essential Guides, authored by known scholars in their respective fields. Walter Brueggemann is an acknowledged master of rhetoric and a seasoned biblical theologian. He applies a phenomenological model of religious experience to the analysis of worship in ancient Israel, capsulized in five chapters, where he speaks of “Dialogic Modes,” “Gestures,” Utterances,” reciprocally, of YHWH and Israel, and “Play,” his name for an interactive game theory. This approach serves him well as a way of organizing the textual evidence so that its meaning comes through. The book is replete with illustrative citations from the Hebrew Bible in translation, which is all for the better. Brueggemann even provides some key Hebrew terms of reference in transcription, bringing the reader closer to the original text.

The orientation of the series of Essential Guides thus far has been predominantly Christian, as indicated by such titles as Christian Ethics, Mission, and Church History, although there is now a guide by Jacob Neusner entitled Rabbinic Judaism. The scope of the subject matter may hopefully broaden in the future, but for the moment the present work poses an educational problem not shared by the other volumes in the series, to date. This guide pertains to Israelite worship in pre-Christian periods of history, and I would have
expected that it would remain true to historical context. I did not expect to read the following statement of purpose on page 1: “In addition to being an essential guide to this subject, this book is intended to be in the service of current theological and practical issues concerning the worship of the church in its ecumenical character.” This is soon followed by another statement that begins: “Broadly we may say that worship in the biblical tradition that eventuates in Christian practice consists in….” The book is dotted with similar comments. See, for instance, the discussion of Yom Kippur on pages 17–18 and its configuration in the book of Hebrews. Also, page 50, where we read, in the course of a discussion of divine rage and vengeance, the following: “Such rhetoric, unpalatable as it is in the piety of conventional Christianity….: Note the discussion of a Lukan parable on page 73, and see the index for more citations from the New Testament.

Now, there is nothing wrong with citing the New Testament or referring to Christian beliefs and practices so as to emphasize the lasting impact of the Hebrew Bible. I would have preferred to find comparable references to rabbinic literature, to midrash and later Jewish interpretation. Such comment, taken from Christian and Jewish sources, would be best presented in a separate chapter and duly labeled, so as to stay in contextual “character.” It is enlightening for all students of the Hebrew Bible, Jewish, Christian, and others, to know both traditions. As it stands, the book suffers, in my opinion, from two shortcomings: it actually gives only “lip service,” not true service, to “the worship of the church” and, at the same time, regresses from the openness that has been achieved in higher education.

It is time to recognize that, at least in secular environments, we today study sacred Scripture in two dimensions, in terms of “context,” which is not religion-specific, and in terms of “community,” which is to say, the differing roles of the same text in the lives of respective religious communities. These two dimensions complement each other but should not be confused. In my opinion, Brueggemann’s guide, in its present form, would not be appropriate for educational programs conducted under secular auspices, where a commitment to context is paramount and where we attempt to enable students of differing religious backgrounds to engage these ancient texts together without theological presuppositions.

To return to the substantive content of the guide, I find it to be highly reliable as far as it goes. Brueggemann bases himself on first-rate scholarship, albeit selective to a noticeable degree, and he adds his own insight, which is considerable. He is attuned to comparative sources that shed light on the development of biblical religion. His judgments on the developing forms of worship are generally well founded, and he exudes an attitude of seriousness about the performance of religion.
Coverage of the subject of worship exhibits a major omission, however. There is virtually no discussion of sacred space, no clarification of what cult sites looked like or where they were located. What about temples, especially the central temple in Jerusalem? What about altars and religious symbols? Where did pilgrimages end up? Why is there no emphasis in this guide on the “where” of sacrifice as affecting its efficacy and on the larger significance of the Israelites as living in Canaan, in the Holy Land? All of this cannot be summarily subsumed under the abstract headings of divine “presence” and “absence.” One could conceivably read Brueggemann’s guide from beginning to end without actually realizing in which country all of this religious worship was happening! I note in one citation from a work by Walter Harrelson (see p. 9) a passing reference to the Promised Land, and there are similar references in several biblical citations. But, after reading about liberation from Egypt and the covenant enactment at Sinai, one has the feeling that the road traveled leads nowhere.

The reader should be given some basic information as to when the Israelites flourished, as well as where they lived, some indication of what we are talking about historically. Is “ancient Israel” an abstraction? Who were these people, according to the Old Testament itself? There is a pronounced interest in real people living in real communities, but little is said in this guide about the “horizontal” concerns of religion, only, for the most part, about the “vertical” relationship to God. This emphasis stands squarely within the tradition of theological inquiry, to be sure, but leaves much unsaid about the role of religion in society and culture.

In summary, I would recommend revising the present work in the following ways: (1) I would edit out references to the New Testament and Christianity from the main body of the book and adhere to context. (2) I would, to compensate, add a separate, developed chapter on the later impact of ancient Israelite modes of worship on both Judaism and Christianity. (3) I would introduce material from archaeological and other sources on the realia of worship in ancient Israel. (4) I would provide time charts and brief historical information on the ancient Israelites and on the general content of the Old Testament, our primary source of knowledge on Israelite worship. In other words, I would take the next step in religious education (or “education about religion”), by endorsing interreligious education.