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Walter Brueggemann



An **Unsettling** God  
The Heart of the **Hebrew Bible**

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***An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible***

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This volume is essentially a revised portion of Brueggemann's massive *Theology of the Old Testament* (Fortress, 1997). Specifically, chapters 2–6 of *An Unsettling God* correspond to chapters 14–18 of part 3 of Brueggemann's earlier work. These chapters are structured similarly, and the revisions seem to be very slight, with the exception of some expanded reflections on the relationship between Jewish and Christian interpretations (55–56). Both the preface and chapter 1 contain some new material and orient readers to the focus of the book.

In the preface, Brueggemann states his thesis as follows: "The big idea of this book (that echoes the big idea of the Old Testament) is that the God of ancient Israel (who is the creator of heaven and earth) is *a God in relationship*, who is ready and able to make commitments and who is impinged upon by a variety of 'partners' who make a difference in the life of God" (xi, emphasis original). One of the critical implications of this, according to Brueggemann, is that "faith in the Old Testament" must be understood as "a dialogical exchange that is potentially transformative for all parties," God included (xii). Brueggemann then identifies and briefly discusses the four partners under consideration: Israel, human persons, the nations, and creation. He believes that this investigation has

contemporary application and can help us articulate our faith in a postmodern context (xii).

Chapter 1 lays out some of Brueggemann's presuppositions about the rendering of God in the Old Testament. He believes the Old Testament resists "settledness" and "vagueness" when it speaks of God (2). Rather, the Old Testament portrays God as profoundly personal and relational, and this yields specificity without settledness and variety without vagueness. To flesh out the "dialogical reading" Brueggemann believes essential for understanding God in the Old Testament, he appeals to the work of Jewish scholars Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Emmanuel Levinas (5–9). Additionally, building on the work of Abraham Heschel, Brueggemann emphasizes "the notion of pathos," which he understands as being illustrative of the fact that YHWH is "not only able to act but is available to be *acted upon*" (9, emphasis original). This relational reciprocity is foundational to Brueggemann's thesis.

Each of the next four chapters examines the relationship between YHWH and one of the four partners. Chapter 2 focuses on the partnership between YHWH and Israel, which the Old Testament suggests is "the key partner" (19). As the ancestral narratives and the exodus narrative portray it, Israel's existence is contingent upon the will and word of YHWH, a God motivated by love who takes the initiative to constitute them as a people. Israel is expected to respond to this gracious overture with obedience. Specifically, Israel is to do justice and to be holy, activities "commensurate" (a frequent term in the book) with the character of YHWH. According to Brueggemann, "The obedience of Israel as YHWH's partner concerns the demanding practice of neighborliness [justice] and the rigorous discipline of presence with God [holiness]" (34). Beyond this, Israel also has a responsibility to the larger world, as indicated in texts such as Exod 19:5–6, Gen 12:3, and Isa 42:6. Although Israel fails to live obediently, and thus lives under the threat of dissolution, given the dialogic nature of the relationship, Israel's posture here is not one of resignation or hopelessness but of repentance and hope. Thankfully for Israel, YHWH extends the possibility of newness after judgment.

In chapter 3, Brueggemann explores the relationship between YHWH and the human person in the Old Testament. According to Brueggemann, "The human person is *a person in relation to YHWH*, who lives in an intense mutuality with YHWH" (60, emphasis original). Brueggemann makes specific connections between such things as YHWH's sovereignty and human obedience and YHWH's faithfulness and "human freedom." This is developed more specifically as listening, discerning, and trusting (67–77), which Brueggemann describes as "three disciplines of humanness" (67). Brueggemann believes these disciplines are natural responses to YHWH when all is well, "when the sovereignty and fidelity of YHWH can be credibly asserted and gladly accepted" (77). In the face of

adversity, however, people will respond with complaint and petition (78–79). They do so in hopes of “mobilizing” YHWH. The expectation, of course, is that God will act, and thanksgiving befits such divine action (80–81). Finally, humans engage in acts of “praise and hope,” which Brueggemann believes “properly are placed, understood, and enacted at the culmination of the drama of rehabilitation” (82).

Chapter 4 examines the partnership between God and the nations and begins with a discussion of Ps 96:10. The purpose of this passage “is to assert and to enact YHWH’s legitimate governance over the nations and the peoples of the world” (100, emphasis original). The first part of the chapter considers the issue of the partnership between YHWH and the nations as “a testimony that is Israel-driven ... that interprets everything as though its primary point of concern is Israel” (103). The second part of the chapter examines the relationship between YHWH and four “superpowers”: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. According to Brueggemann, the first three of these are described as following a similar pattern: “mandate,” “autonomous rebellion,” “dismantling,” and “rehabilitation” (127). Persia is the exception, since it is portrayed as “the exemplar of a positive, responsive partner” (126).

Of YHWH’s four partners, the least amount of space is devoted to creation (ch. 5). Creation, as ordered by YHWH, is to exude fruitfulness and blessing. There are anticreational forces, however, that work against these good outcomes and that jeopardize the entire creative enterprise. These negative forces can be variously understood as “primordial dualism” (143–46) or as “a force now conquered by YHWH, in the service of YHWH” (147). In the context of the covenantal curses, Brueggemann writes, “When YHWH is not obeyed and when the limits of creation are not respected, all of creation is placed in profound jeopardy” (149–50). Still, YHWH seems reticent to utterly destroy all creation and operates with restraint. As Brueggemann puts it, “YHWH is unable and unwilling to ‘go the whole way’ with the termination of creation” (153). As with other partners, creation anticipates the hope of renewal as evidenced in texts such as Hos 2:14–23 and Isa 62:3–5 and 65:17–25.

Chapter 6 concludes the book and summarizes the “movement” YHWH’s partners experience. All were created “for glad obedience,” experience “a failed relationship,” and ultimately enjoy “rehabilitation for a new beginning” (164). Or, to put it simply, all move from “brokenness” to “restoration,” something Brueggemann regards as “the primary ingredient of life with YHWH” (164).

In this volume, Brueggemann judiciously focuses on key passages, engages contemporary thinkers, and writes in evocative and stimulating ways. He does an admirable job of supporting his thesis and makes a persuasive case that YHWH is, indeed, relational. His

emphasis upon the interactive nature of YHWH's relationship with various partners is quite important, especially the notion that YHWH can be influenced by human agents. This underscores the dynamic character of YHWH and forces readers to rethink some of the ways God has traditionally been described. Brueggemann's discussion represents a careful reading of the Old Testament that is true to the text and is not held captive by the constructs of Greek philosophy that often dominate the way God is conceived.

Brueggemann sometimes refers to Israel's "core testimony," "countertestimony," and "unsolicited testimony" without defining these concepts. While this language will be very familiar to readers of Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament*, it will make less sense to others. Some discussion of these concepts would have been helpful here. Also, since the bulk of this volume comes from Brueggemann's earlier work, it would have been beneficial to indicate how this material fits into that work.

I enjoyed Brueggemann's discussion of Israel's need to do justice (26–30), which he identifies as Israel's "principal obligation" (27). I also appreciated his discussion of Amos 9:7, an intriguing text suggesting that other nations had their own "exodus" of sorts. I wonder, though, if he claims too much when he writes, "The way in which Israel is treated by YHWH in the exodus is the way in which every people may expect to be treated by YHWH" (129). I found his brief discussion of the genocidal commands in Deuteronomy (104–5) unsatisfying and wished he would have dealt with these texts—and others like them—more extensively. What do such divine decrees suggest about God's partnership with the nations? Similarly, when YHWH is portrayed as instantly annihilating someone or killing tens of thousands in an act of divine judgment, how do these actions fit into the dramatic pattern of brokenness and restoration Brueggemann envisions?

A more substantial concern has to do with the limitations of Brueggemann's *descriptive* theological approach. Obviously, when working out a theology of the Old Testament, it is crucial to allow the text to dictate one's description of God. On the whole, Brueggemann does a good job of this, but I wish he had also commented on the extent to which he believes this characterization of God reflects the nature and character of the God people worship today. I realize this moves beyond the specific concerns of Brueggemann's study, but it is inevitable that readers of faith will wonder about this.

That said, I believe readers have much to learn from Brueggemann, and a careful reading can yield many valuable insights. This volume makes some key ideas from his earlier work more accessible, and for that readers can be grateful.