

**REVIEW**

Walter Brueggemann

***Chosen?: Reading the Bible  
amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict***

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In the toxically polarized arena of Israeli-Palestinian issues, it is often most judicious to allow new advocates of the most entrenched viewpoints to enter and have their say without notice, particularly when the entry is framed as a brief, popular treatment that comes complete with a study guide in the familiar format inviting discussion and reflection in the adult forums of Christian congregations. When the advocate is a magisterial scholar and teacher of the Bible known globally for his critical expertise and his congenial pastoral style, though, who tells us he will show us “how to read the Bible responsibly” (p. 1), the entry can hardly be ignored. Add to this the explicitly politicized character of the work, and a robust engagement is unavoidable.

So it is with Walter Brueggemann’s slim, four-chapter volume, which he tells us is “my attempt to fulfill my vocation as a teacher of the church” (p. x). He writes from a judgment “that important initiatives must be taken to secure the human rights of Palestinians,” with the “hope that U.S. Christians will become more vigorous advocates for human rights and will urge the U.S. government to back away from a one-dimensional ideology for the sake of political realism” (pp. xv-xvi). Five unnumbered pages of introductory testimonials to the value of the book, from ten prominent activists, scholars, and church bureaucrats aligned with human rights and Palestinian causes, confirm that the publisher’s intent is consistent with the author’s. Brueggemann further establishes his standpoint when

he acknowledges that his study “has been informed by the witness of Naim Stifan Ateek and the ongoing work of Sabeel” (p. x), that “most important for [him] has been an ongoing conversation with Mark Braverman” (p. x), and that “there is...no realistic hope for any two-state solution” because “Israel...never intends to allow a viable Palestinian state” (p. 58).

In his four chapters, Brueggemann deals with biblical hermeneutics, the “claim and problem” of chosenness, the land promise, and Zionism. He operates throughout with a number of repeated truisms. First, any “straight-line” reading from scripture to present-day issues is suspect (p. 10); second, the hardening of a symbol into an ideology is dangerous; and third, there is a profound need to deal with facts on the ground and to undertake clear-eyed socio-geopolitical analysis. Would that his truisms more frequently shaped his own work. When it suits, he is quite adept at inferring “one dimension of [seemingly immutable] Judaism” from “Ezra the Exclusionist” (pp. 5-6) and implying that the ideology of contemporary Zionism is “of a piece with that ancient conquest of the ‘city of David’” (p. 50). Similar straight lines are drawn regarding Israel’s chosenness as conditional or unconditional (p. 18), our capacity to conclude from biblical texts what the enduring truth is about the granting and holding of land (p. 29), and the exclamation that “the conditional *if* of the Torah has prevailed!” (p. 33).

It is in his engagement with contemporary Israel that he most clearly contradicts his mantras regarding the danger of ideology and the need for a hard-nosed dealing with reality. Notwithstanding a few glosses about distinctions between Judaism and ideological Zionism and about the presence of political diversity in Israel, the book raises a drumbeat of accusation against present-day Israel and its leadership as religious ideologues who misappropriate the Bible. Yet nowhere does he quote an Israeli source. There is no reference to Israel’s Proclamation of Independence or its Basic Laws, no voice of a contemporary political or religious leader (see esp. pp. 5-7, 37-39, and 49-50), no indication of the society’s vibrant, conten-

tious political and religious debate. Brueggemann seems simply to know the truth about Israel, its intentions, and its character. He bluntly accuses “the contemporary Zionist movement” of “equating ... the *state of Israel* with the *faith of Israel*” as though Jewish scholars such as Louis Jacobs and Byron Sherwin had not already challenged the “substitute faiths” of Judaism from within the community (see Sherwin’s *Faith Finding Meaning*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009). And he takes no account of the distinction between Israel’s 1.7 million Palestinian citizens and the larger Palestinian population that lives under military occupation and the Palestinian Authority; the Palestinian Arab Israeli citizens simply disappear from his view of the situation.

Particularly troubling from a biblical scholar of Brueggemann’s stature are several literary and historical mistakes and imprecisions in his presentation. In addressing the question of chosenness as conditional or unconditional, evidence is brought from Deuteronomy, Exodus 19, and “much of the prophetic writings” without regard to their disparate historical contexts (p. 18). Language of “love” and “setting one’s heart” is interpreted emotively as “smitten” without attention to the nuances of ancient philology (p. 17). Though he gives attention to Amos 9:7 and Isaiah 19:24-25 in his discussion of the “very important” topic of biblical views of non-Jews, he characterizes them as “at the edge of the Old Testament.” They are, he claims, “rare and likely too much should not be made of them” (pp. 22-25). His depiction of restoration hope in Isaiah and Jeremiah ends with a reference to the final verses of the Bible, 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, as the ending of “the entire canon,” ignoring the many centuries that stand between the prophets and any decision about where to place Chronicles within the Tanakh (p. 35).

The problem is most evident on pages 28-30, where Brueggemann discusses traditions regarding the gift of the land in canonical order as though it represents historical development. Moreover, he tells us that the “Deuteronomic ‘if’ became a primary theme among the prophets of the eighth

and seventh centuries BCE,” notwithstanding broad scholarly agreement that Deuteronomic theology developed only near the end of the seventh century BCE. The Torah is portrayed as Israel’s “original or earliest tradition” despite Brueggemann’s own recognition in the next paragraph that “critical judgment now has concluded that the Torah was formulated in the fifth century during the Persian period.” Of what value is the contradictory portrayal of the Torah as original or early, if not to trade on the common assumption that what is original is most authentic and later perspectives are variants or corruptions?

When Brueggemann tells us that he would show us how to read the Bible responsibly amid the conflict, we might expect that the biblical witness would have something to say about Palestinians as well as about Judaism, Zionism, and modern Israel. He offers nothing, though, either to support or to critique Palestinian ideas of nationalism, peoplehood, governance, or relations with “the other,” and undertakes no assessment of Palestinian engagement in the conflict.

What one does not expect (except for the acknowledgment of Naim Ateek as a strong influence) is the casual incursion of tired antisemitic tropes into the book. There are several: Jews are preoccupied with purity, claim unwarranted privilege and exclusive election, and abuse their uncommon wealth. Thus Brueggemann argues that early Judaism formed around racial (!) purity (pp.5-6). Jon Levenson’s objection to liberation theology’s slogan is incorrectly presented as a protest by Levenson against the usurpation of Israel’s claim to privileged status (p. 22). Christianity for Brueggemann supersedes Judaism in its understanding of “the reach of God’s promise beyond Israel for the sake of other people” (p. 23). Sociopolitical-theological claims for Jerusalem / Zion spring from “a small urban elite who enjoyed surplus wealth resulting from peasant agriculture in the surrounding region” (p. 41).

Brueggemann is clear about his purpose; he certainly knows how the Bible has been read by some religious Zionists,

Jewish and Christian, to undermine both concern for and the rights of the Palestinian people in seeking their own national self-expression. We can greatly appreciate his intent to counteract that dangerous interpretive approach. The overreach in his argument, however, quickly undermines the usefulness of this study in seeking the mutual respect and accommodation that I believe he earnestly desires among those who care deeply about Israel and the Palestinian people. Without demonstrating in his own work the care and respect that he asks both for the Palestinian people and for the biblical heritage of Jews and Christians, he does not help us move beyond polarizations and demonizations that deepen the conflict and import it into our own churches.