

Adhering to Israel's God

by [Leo G. Perdue](#) in the [May 20, 1998](#) issue

By Walter Brueggemann, Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy. (Fortress, 777 pp.)

Walter Brueggemann's brilliant new book, the culmination of a lifetime of incisive theological work, embodies the transitional moment between one interpretive age and the creative stirrings of a new one. While he does not assume that new methods are always incompatible with those born of the Enlightenment, Brueggemann is certain that the past has to make room for new ways of interpreting scripture. He deftly guides us in new directions even as he continues to learn from earlier Old Testament theologians such as William Foxwell Albright and Gerhard von Rad. In so systematically and imaginatively ushering Old Testament theology into a new interpretive era, Brueggemann deserves to be listed among those few individuals who have decisively shaped this theology in the 20th century.

Brueggemann begins his study with a masterful survey of Old Testament theology's past and present and provides the background necessary for understanding his new insights. He divides the introduction into two parts: in the first he reviews the history of Old Testament theology; in the second he analyzes the contemporary situation.

Over the past two centuries, Old Testament theology has been shaped by two countervailing forces: since the Reformation, the church has been reluctant to free the Bible from its doctrinal interpretations; but since the Enlightenment, the history-of-religions approach that prevails in the academy has refused to be limited by the constraints of faith. Furthermore, most Jewish scholars have not participated in Old Testament theology, choosing instead to live with the tensions of traditions that have shaped different expressions of Judaism.

J. P. Gabler first clearly differentiated historically oriented theological interpretation of the Old Testament from the dogmatic enterprise of church teachings in his famous 1787 inaugural address at the University of Altdorf. The scientific--largely positivistic--methodology of historical criticism remained independent of the church's claims and control, and consequently denied scripture a privileged position of interpretation. The Bible became one more piece of literature. In essence the

academy replaced the church's doctrinal claims with the Enlightenment's claims of universal norms of reason. Echoing Hans Frei, a proponent of the narrative approach to the Bible, Brueggemann laments that the method first announced by Gabler ended by explaining away most of Israel's theological story and depriving it of its normative status for the church.

Karl Barth recovered the normative value of the Bible and, like Luther before him, argued that it has its own distinctive voice. Yet the rise of neo-orthodoxy only reasserted the unresolved tension between the assumptions of historical criticism and the neoevangelical affirmations of dogmatic theology. Brueggemann concedes that most Old Testament scholarship has elected not to choose between the two.

Although this tension within the history of Old Testament theology has not been solved, the terms of the debate are now different, Brueggemann claims. History no longer dominates Old Testament theology. Indeed, we have made something of an epistemological break with the past and are moving into uncharted territory where excitement and risk are inseparable. Pluralism is one feature of the contemporary situation. It is a feature of the biblical canon itself, with its diversity of literature and communities. Pluralism also characterizes approaches to the texts, which range from the sociological perspectives of scholars like Norman Gottwald to the rhetorical criticism of Phyllis Trible.

Perhaps most important for Brueggemann is that the Bible's linguistic character has come to the fore. Brueggemann argues that language helps to create reality. The God of the Hebrew Bible is to be found and known primarily not in history, beyond history or in creation but rather in the speech of Israel. True, God is transcendent; to think otherwise makes an idol of language. However, God is also "in the fray"--in the texture of human life out of which the Bible's language takes form.

For Brueggemann the Hebrew Bible is governed largely by stories that generate "story-worlds." These stories are acts of human imagination. They are not limited by "what happened." He has long argued that the Hebrew Bible is a product of the imagination that creates a "counterversion (sub-version) of reality" that "deabsolutizes and destabilizes what 'the world' regards as given." The language of the Hebrew Bible does not often seek to legitimate an existing social order but rather attempts to undercut a debilitating power structure. Theologically this means that Israel's God is subject not to the norms of classical theology but to the rules of the drama itself.

Brueggemann acknowledges that in every social dispute some participants seek to maintain the status quo, others caution against hasty change, and still others engage in transformative action. All these positions are found in the Hebrew Bible and are often in dialogue and competition with one another. Nevertheless, he confesses: "The present writer is unflagging in his empathy toward that revolutionary propensity in the text." To a large extent, says Brueggemann, the Hebrew Bible responds to the crisis of the exile and thus proposes a "counter-reality." This means that modern readers should also read the Hebrew Bible as persons who are "displaced and as waiting for homecoming."

As part of his analysis of the contemporary situation Brueggemann considers three theological options that he judges to be inadequate. Foundationalism affirms that the epistemology of modernism should be used to take the declarations of the Hebrew Bible into the public arena for debate. Canon criticism, especially as practiced by Brevard Childs, claims that the canon, approached and understood within the community of faith rather than the academy, and read through the categories of systematic theology, is the context for doing biblical theology. Brueggemann refers to a third option as a "seriatim reading," by which Hebrew texts are read one at a time without reference to the other. The result is a variegated pluralism devoid of dialogue and critical engagement.

Brueggemann rejects each of these and instead opts for a "postliberal approach" commonly associated with the ideas of Hans Frei, George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas. This strategy seeks to understand and acknowledge the text, even in its often strange otherness, without making undue accommodation either to the rational discourse of the modern world or to the affirmations of classical Christianity. Thus, Brueggemann pays close attention to the "grammar and dialect of this textual tradition" that creates a "grammar of faith." This does not mean that the articulation of faith is merely a linguistic matter. He recognizes that "Israel's grammar was indeed impinged on by the vagaries of historical experience."

Brueggemann also recognizes that Old Testament theology exists in two historically and culturally distinct audiences. The first is the ancient community that begins its assent to this text. The second audience is the ongoing Jewish and Christian one that continues to affirm the validity of biblical theology and to harbor many alternative understandings. This means theology is "polyphonic"; the many voices of the text merge into one voice to achieve ongoing authority.

Brueggemann concludes his masterful introduction by raising four perennial questions. First, what of historical criticism? This method arose in the Enlightenment and aimed to be objective, scientific and positivistic. The ultimate goal was to remove the Bible from the interpretive control of the church. Brueggemann does not reject historical criticism, but he seeks to counterbalance its claims. Second, how does Old Testament theology relate to church theology? Brueggemann does not agree with Childs that the church is the exclusive context for doing Old Testament theology. For Brueggemann, the Old Testament theologian must heed the text and its meaning whether or not it conforms to dogmatic teachings. Thus, Old Testament theology is as uneasy with church theology as it is with historical criticism.

Third, how does the Old Testament theologian, almost always a Christian, acknowledge and then deal judiciously with the Jewishness of the Old Testament? For Brueggemann, Old Testament theology must give an appropriate place to the Jewish character and claims of the text. Brueggemann cannot accept a supersessionist reading whereby the New Testament and the teachings of the church supersede the teachings of the Hebrew Bible. He affirms that there is not one construal but many, including Jewish ones. Finally, Brueggemann asks what “public possibilities” exist for the Old Testament. His primary answer is that Old Testament theology is part of a revolutionary struggle over goods, power and the survival of global communities.

The major components of Brueggemann’s Old Testament theology now become clear. First, Brueggemann stands, though at times uneasily, within the boundaries of both the academy and the church. While he affirms the value of historical criticism, he rejects its elitism, some of its assumptions and its exclusive claims. However, he does not dismiss earlier scholarship. Second, Brueggemann stands firmly within the church. He recognizes that Old Testament theology is largely, but not entirely, a Christian enterprise. He recognizes the authenticity of other voices, especially those of Judaism. Third, Brueggemann rejects a systematic (or dogmatic) approach to Old Testament theology, not only because of the obvious pluralism of the texts within the canon and the cultures that interpret the Bible, but also because this approach tends to fall in line with the church’s views of scripture.

Fourth, Brueggemann supports the voices from the margins who speak not only from within contemporary global realities but also from within the confines of the Hebrew Bible itself. Indeed, he argues that the major thrust of the Hebrew Bible is antielitist and subversive of the power structures that tend to oppress and

dehumanize their victims. Fifth, Brueggemann advocates a postliberal theology that seeks to construct a “grammar of faith” for Old Testament theology. This means that God is construed largely by the language of the Hebrew text (verbs, nouns, direct objects, and adjectives), not by great acts in history or the constitution of divine being (ontology). And sixth, Brueggemann does not shy away from acknowledging the impact of the Hebrew Bible on the New Testament and the later church. While the Hebrew Bible should not be abused by reading the faith of later Christianity into the text, its importance for shaping Christian faith should not be ignored.

Brueggemann presents his theology by using the theme of a trial or courtroom drama. He investigates the nature of God as revealed by Israel’s testimony, countertestimony, unsolicited testimony and embodied testimony.

Testimony: The most important witness to Old Testament theology, contends Brueggemann, consists of the great affirmations of Israelite faith that center in verbs of action, verbs that speak of God transforming, intruding or inverting. In this type of “grammar,” the subject of the verb is often God, and the verb has a direct object. These objects include Israel, primarily, but also humanity, the nations and the world.

One of Brueggemann’s key examples of this “grammar of faith” is the thanksgiving genre. The thanksgiving speaks not only of the transcendence and sovereignty of God but also of divine participation in the world. Righteousness becomes the means by which the two polarities of divine action, those of sovereignty and pathos, are united: the sovereign God intervenes in situations of trouble and acts justly and decisively to address their challenges. These divine activities of sovereignty and participation include, first, creation--God brings into being a world that is hospitable to life. The dark side of this affirmation is the way it can be used to support oppressive regimes that claim divine right to rule. Israel rejects this abuse of theological confession by countering that God is partial to the oppressed and seeks to undermine their oppressors.

The second rendering of the divine activities of rule and pathos is expressed in the affirmation of the God who makes promises. Especially important are the promises to the ancestors, who would become a great nation and an avenue of divine blessing, and the promise to David, whose house would rule over Israel and eventually the nations.

The third divine activity is to deliver. God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt allows it to live in hope and courage in times of distress. God is an untiring opponent of oppression who works to create justice for all. The fourth activity of God is to command. Especially paradigmatic is the giving of the law at Sinai. The law, better translated as "teaching," provides guidance for life and the basis for judgment in both society and worship.

The fifth divine activity is to lead. God is one who intervenes to lead Israel in every circumstance. While testing the chosen, God is also present even in moments of high risk and great suffering to create blessing. Brueggemann recognizes that there is an openness to this story line. Unlike von Rad, whose "Hexateuch" ends with the conquest of the land (in Joshua), Brueggemann stops where the Torah concludes: with Israel encamped east of the Jordan awaiting entrance to the promised land. This lack of closure means that the Torah is shaped by the crisis of the exile. Believers, then and now, wait in hope for fulfillment.

Brueggemann also examines the major adjectives and nouns that describe the character of God. His "credo" of adjectives includes "merciful," "gracious," "slow to anger" and "forgiving." Nouns speak of the knowability and constancy of God.

Brueggemann proposes that, in the language of affirmation, Israel moves from the particular (verbs), to the general (adjectives), to the more general (nouns). Nouns used of God typically are metaphors, meaning that God is both elusive and beyond the concreteness of human speech. Brueggemann notes that Israel's use of metaphors not only guards against idolatry but also tends toward monotheism. Metaphors for God include those of governance: the righteous judge committed to just rule and opposed to exploitation; the noble king who rules wisely and righteously in undoing the wiles of the wicked and protecting the innocent and victims from abuse; the loving father who cares for and yet holds Israel accountable; and the warrior who implements a rule that is both just and compassionate.

In considering the last metaphor, Brueggemann argues, not always convincingly, that for Israel war is conducted to defend and to give life. Also, war rhetoric is uttered by those without power who have no other means to obtain justice. Finally, Brueggemann contends that God lives at the edge of such violence--war is not central to divine activity. Brueggemann does not ignore the terrifying accounts of war in the Hebrew Bible, especially those of the conquest of the Canaanites and the slaughter of even Israelites and Judahites by foreign invaders, which some prophets

depict as instruments of divine judgment. But he does not rigorously criticize this representation.

To be fair, Brueggemann does take on the “demonic” side of God in later chapters. And he notes that there is a contradiction between those metaphors that speak of God’s forgiveness and care for Israel and victims and those that tell of divine participation in war and punishment.

A second set of metaphors of God have to do with sustenance--that is, nurture and blessing that enhance life. Yahweh is the doctor who can heal a wounded people, a gardener who plants and harvests the fruits of creation, a mother who begets, bears and nourishes her children, and a shepherd who tends the flock.

These two sets of metaphors, governance and sustenance, along with many others, point to the multiple images Israel used to speak of God. This multiplicity means that Old Testament theology resists reduction, is fluid and open, and thick in its description. To literalize or homogenize these images is to engage in idolatry, which Israel resisted. They also demonstrate, along with the nouns, verbs and adjectives, that there is no center to Old Testament theology and no strategy for constructing a systematic rendering.

Israel’s Countertestimony: Israel did not consider countertestimony unfaithful. Its faith is constantly probing and questioning. Thus, the Psalter raises the questions of “why?,” “how long?” and “where?” Brueggemann argues that if God is not endlessly subjected to such criticism, the result is idolatry.

One of the themes of Israel’s countertestimony is the hiddenness of Yahweh. In wisdom literature, especially, God is not directly known. Rather, God is revealed in the processes of daily life and in the workings, orderly or not, of creation. The sages came to regard God as the creator of life-sustaining structures and the hidden guarantor of life. Those who lived in concert with the orders of creation recognized that they were accountable to the creator. This hiddenness at times took on an aesthetic dimension, especially in the priestly description of the character and function of the tabernacle and temple. Through priestly ritual, divine power is unleashed to produce blessing that sustains and enhances life.

A second theme of Israel’s countertestimony is Yahweh’s governance. The creating, ordering and sustaining care of God is at times personified as Woman Wisdom. Still, the sages admitted that there were contingencies of life and that God was

mysterious. They subsequently yielded to the unlimited freedom of God, though they generally acknowledged in their traditional expressions that God created a world of goodness and required obedience.

There is a dark side to this countertestimony. In certain texts, Yahweh appears as devious, unstable and unreliable. At times God is deceptive and abusive, as for instance in Jeremiah's complaint in Jeremiah 20:7-18 and in the narrative account of the divine council to which the prophet Micaiah ben Imlah is privy (1 Kings 22:20-22). Why is it that David can be forgiven, but Saul cannot? This lack of consistency in the treatment of humans points to the presence of divine caprice.

Countertestimony also includes acknowledging the negative side of the character of Yahweh, as when Israel experiences punishment in great disproportion to its guilt or when God is silent and fails to act. Yahweh is accused of forgetting or dishonoring the covenant (Pss. 35; 86:14-16) or violently attacking without cause (Job). Indeed, it is this very point that leads to the questioning of divine justice.

The dark side of God is even more apparent in Ecclesiastes. God is a radically sovereign, inscrutable and capricious deity. Life makes no sense. All that Ecclesiastes affirms is that God does not care about differentiations and their fairness.

Brueggemann neither silences this countertestimony nor seeks to resolve the tension between affirmation and dissent. This tension between testimony and countertestimony belongs to the very core of Old Testament faith. Israelite theology is dialectical. Christian tradition continues the same dialectic: Friday of Easter week is the day of countertestimony, while Easter Sunday is the affirmation of the core testimony. Biblical faith is a dialectic that collapses if one of the two major poles is negated. Apocalyptic faith awaits in hope the resolution of this tension.

Israel's Unsolicited Testimony: Even against the advice of an attorney, a witness will often offer unsolicited testimony. For this testimony, Brueggemann turns to Yahweh's four "partners": Israel, humanity, the nations and creation.

Israel, of course, is God's most significant other. Israel affirms that Yahweh redeems it, issues promises for its future, leads it even in times of trial, and guides it through commands and instruction. Perhaps most important in this partnership is the original love of God for Israel expressed in the ancestral narratives and those of the Exodus and Sinai. This love by God requires the partner's obligatory love, especially

expressed in covenant obedience.

The human person is Yahweh's second partner. Humans exist in relationship with God not as autonomous individuals but as creatures subject to the sovereignty of God and obedient to the divine will. Brueggemann points to the relational and dynamic features of this partnership (see Gen. 9:8-17).

Surprisingly, he argues that the notion of humanity made in the image of God plays a very small role in the Hebrew Bible. It is the breathing in of the divine breath that enables humans to become living persons, and this theme underscores that people depend on God to live. Individualism is rejected in favor of communal existence. The well-being of humans is commensurate with the degree of God's sovereignty and mercy, for God, not humans, ultimately rules over and cares for the world.

The third partner of Yahweh is the nations. Israel came to acknowledge that the span of the divine reach was not limited to Israel but extended to all peoples. The destiny of every nation was under the sovereignty of God. God summoned the nations to divine blessing mediated through Israel, but also used the nations to punish the chosen people. When they overstepped their limits, they received Yahweh's just punishment. The nations also were allowed the possibility of forgiveness and restoration.

The fourth and final partner of Yahweh is creation. God blesses creation, issuing a life-giving and life-sustaining power that makes existence possible. This divine blessing is the gift of God to humans, who are required not to exploit God's good creation. Worship is the setting in which the generosity of creation is both praised and embellished. Israel did not ignore the destructive capacity of creation, but regarded worship as the means by which this destruction could be negated and blessing could be increased. Creation was not formed once for all, but stood in jeopardy at the hands of an unruly chaos that could bring life and its sustaining orders to an end. Yet even on occasions of seeming hopelessness, Israel could believe in the renewal of creation.

Israel's Embodied Testimony: The first embodied testimony is the Torah. The Torah, says Brueggemann, is the authoritative rendering of the encounter of Israel with Yahweh at Mount Sinai. However, the Torah is not fixed once and for all but continues to be shaped by and in turn forms a community that encounters Yahweh. The Psalter is imbued with this same Torah piety (Pss. 1, 19, 119) and eventually

becomes the authoritative basis for wisdom. Torah eventually is centered eschatologically in Zion (Jerusalem), not Sinai, and through its internalization Yahweh becomes known by all nations as the sovereign ruler of the world. Ignoring the constraints of Torah leads to undisciplined, godless existence, while a move to the other extreme, legalism, turns the religious and moral life into a sterile, rigid existence. Jews and Christians must learn to adapt to the reality of normative teaching. To practice Torah means not only ethical and responsible living but also reflective study and pious devotion and worship.

The second embodiment of testimony is the king who also serves as God's mediator. While not universally embraced, eventually the royal house of David became central to Israel's life. Even with the failure of the dynasty in 587 b.c.e., the messianic hope awaited one who would one day rule justly on behalf of Yahweh. In time, this messianism merged with the image of the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13 and the Servant in Second Isaiah--the human being who would descend from the House of David and reconstitute a faithful and just community of God.

The prophet is the third embodiment of testimony. Yahweh called prophets who would speak on his behalf, delivering messages of destruction and salvation. Prophets speak not universals but concrete particularities, and they speak in metaphors that destabilize and invite alternative perceptions of reality. Often challenged because they possessed no objective proof of their calling, prophets frequently suffered the fate of persecution and even death. The essence of the prophetic message is the articulation of Yahweh's divine control and guidance of all history.

The cultus served as the fourth mediator of divine presence. Like the German school before him, Brueggemann reclaims worship as a central dimension of Old Testament theology. Worship shapes the communal identity, while the place of worship empowers Israel's liturgical imagination. It was here that Yahweh dwelt and ruled over the world as divine sovereign. It was here that the power of divine rule exerted claim over the threat of chaos.

The sage served as the final mediator of divine presence. Creation is central to the sages' theological understanding, for through the orders of life brought into existence by God human existence was made possible. Through righteous and wise behavior these orders were enhanced and the community of Israel enjoyed well-being. The distortions of sapiential teaching include legalism and opportunism. While

earlier wisdom dealt primarily with practical everyday life, eventually Torah and wisdom converged. Brueggemann agrees in part with von Rad that wisdom tradition was a major source of apocalyptic thinking. Finally, the sages became redactors of Israel's earlier literature.

Brueggemann suggests that the dialectical pattern of testimony and countertestimony provides a model for our current situation. As Israel could not reach hegemony in its understanding, so we in the postmodern period cannot. Old Testament theology does not aim at consensus, but rather at an ongoing conversation, situated in a variety of changing contexts, about the character and activity of God.

Perhaps we must be content to live by asking the right questions and not by finding the correct answers. Yet I wonder how one ever comes to moral decisions and affirmations of faith without the risky business of saying yes or no to testimonies and disputations in our own time and place. Dialogue takes us only so far. Decisions finally have to be made that are critical to human faith and action, and life itself.

Brueggemann rightly contends that pluralism does not mean that anything goes. He says that the dominant alternative to Israel's Yahwism in our time is a military consumerism in which individual persons are the primary units of meaning and reference. According to this modern vision, happiness lies in obtaining, using and consuming materials without restraint, even when this exacts a heavy price from others. This construal of reality is military in the sense that the use of force or of the threat of force secures and maintains one's disproportionate right to goods--and this power is equated with happiness. Yahwism, by contrast, emphasizes the sharing of gifts generously with the poor. Israel's world invites us to participate in a covenant exchange that continually redeploys power between the strong and the weak. All must be neighbors.

Yet I wonder if it is wealth and power that are the culprits and whether redistribution of goods is the key solution. I would contend that the Hebrew Bible condemns not wealth, but rather the hoarding of wealth that leads to the destitution, deprivation and even annihilation of the "neighbor" and the "other."

We are truly at the end of one dominant age of theological interpretation and at the beginning of another. The threats to the present world order, grounded in what Brueggemann calls "military capitalism," abound in frightening form. In its "Christian" form, this ideology, especially as used by the Religious Right, has

undergirded and sought to legitimate the current Promethean world order of the West in general and the U.S. in particular. Brueggemann seeks to undo this cultural ideology by pointing to Israel's fundamental affirmation of the justice of God.