

Classroom encounters: The voices behind the text

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [February 13, 2002](#) issue

In the safe, posh setting of the seminary, the Bible can seem straightforward enough. For example, my class one day was considering 1 Samuel 5, which is about the capture of the ark of YHWH by the Philistines, who brought it to the town of Ashdod and placed it before Dagon, the Philistines' god. In a strange nighttime turn of events, the statue of Dagon is turned on its face before the unblinking ark of the Lord, and then Dagon's face lies shattered before the unimpressed ark.

The narrative seems clear enough. Surely it is obvious that in the night the unspeakable, silent power of YHWH rose up and pushed Dagon over. We considered that event, and were ready to move on.

But then Bill Bailey spoke up. He was an African-American in an all-white class of Calvinists. He heard the "obvious" conclusion that seemed a proper inference from the text and then said, grinning, "I don't think so!" He did not think a silent YHWH, seated on the ark, acted in the night. Rather, he dared to say, more likely some Israelites sneaked in and pushed Dagon over and the silent God of the ark never said anything, did not even thank them for doing their work. Bill said it was not God, but God's people, who did the deed. Infer what you like.

The class was stunned. These students knew all about "divine initiative." But they had not felt the need to act on God's behalf, at night, on the sly. We talked a long time about the inferences we make about the God voiced by the text.

Bill Bailey did not let the class off readily or easily. He insisted on his point, not because he doubted the power of God, but because from his social location he understood, intuitively, about praxis, an action that coheres with theory, a human action that coheres with divine claim.

Because of his insistence, we learned important lessons about social location and about multiple textual inferences. Neither Bill nor I had then read James C. Scott's

reflections on “hidden transcripts.” Yet without the term, Bill knew about hidden transcripts that voice convergence between human stealth and divine unresponsiveness.

Since then I have wondered about Dagon. Did Dagon ever know what hit him? All that is left—besides the text—is the torso of the humiliated god at the doorway in Ashdod (v. 5). The torso itself yields no clue about the nature of the nighttime assault. All that is left is the residue of the defeated god the next morning, a sign of a clear victory for the forces of YHWH. No wonder Israel says, “There they repeat the triumphs of the Lord, the triumphs of his peasantry in Israel (Judg. 5:11).

In Ashdod, it is not clear to whom the “triumphs” belong. Israel repeats and repeats and never needs to differentiate the complexities of hidden praxis.