

Ichabod Toward Home, by Walter Brueggemann

reviewed by [Thomas W. Walker](#) in the [June 19, 2002](#) issue

Where is God? This provocative question rings in the ears of all those who energetically engage God and God's promises in the world. For some, the answer comes in a self-assured smugness that appears to lay claims on God's omnipresence as repudiating any claims of pain or struggle. For others, the answer arises in the forlorn cry of the oppressed and suffering for whom the absence and impotence of God seems all too palpable. Or for others, the answer is that God is present and can be managed and therefore controlled ("God is here and God is ours"). For pastors, who each Sunday both embody and encounter the smugness, the cries and the contentment, this provocative book from noted Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that the pastor's homiletical task is one of "guerrilla theater" that challenges commonly held assumptions about God's presence.

The outline for this theater arises out of the strange and exotic tale of the journey of the "ark of the covenant" into and out of Philistine captivity in I Samuel 4-6. This three-day journey involves the catastrophic capture of the ark by the Philistine enemy, a day of silent combat where Israel's God YHWH defeats the Philistines's God Dagon in the stillness of the night, and a final triumphal return of the ark via an unmanned ox-cart to the Israelites. Laying out the contours of this story and exploring its resonance with other parts of the Bible, Brueggemann provides an in-depth reading of a text that echoes with other journeys within scripture, such as exile and return, cross and resurrection.

Tying the variety of these resonances together, Brueggemann paints a coherent picture that each day of the ark's journey provides a counter-reading to our usual theories regarding the presence of God. The day-one capture of the ark and its departed glory counters the smug assurance of God's presence that leads to denial of pain and suffering. The silent victory of YHWH over Dagon in the stillness of the night contests the despair of those who believe that God is absent or unable to act, while the triumphal return on a simple ox-cart subverts the complacency of those

who believe that God is a manageable commodity.

Brueggemann follows his close and evocative reading of the story with an explanatory chapter on biblical criticism. Within this chapter, Brueggemann reflects further on issues that were raised in his magisterial *Theology of the Old Testament* and helps the reader see presuppositions that guided his musings in the earlier chapters. Working from a nonfoundational approach that calls into question an overreliance on and allegiance to historical (did it happen?), rational (is it logical?) or traditional (does it fit dogma?) questions, Brueggemann lays out a fruitful approach to scripture reading that opens the reader to the imaginative possibilities of the text. Of critical importance is his insistence that our historical, rational and creedal assumptions often limit and subjugate the mystery of the biblical text and force the text to "make sense" to our world, instead of allowing it to critique our assumptions and our lives. As he says, the biblical texts are "utterances that assault our closely held worlds. They are surprise raids, surprise assaults on imagination . . ."

The book finishes with just such a "surprise raid" as Brueggemann contemplates the critique that the three-day journey of capture, victory and return offers our "three-day weekends." He argues that modernity's movement through the "three-day weekend" is a movement of escape and often avoidance, while the "three-day journey" of the ark calls for and evokes a determined engagement of life and its vagaries. Given the beauty and incisiveness of his earlier examination of the biblical text, one wishes that Brueggemann had further developed and analyzed the modern assumptions regarding the weekend. However, perhaps the hard work for the inheritors of I Samuel 4-6 is not dwelling on the assumptions that operate in our daily lives, but having those assumptions challenged by the encounter with this strange text about traveling arks--an encounter that refuses to leave us be and calls us to be shaped anew by its "three-day" journey.