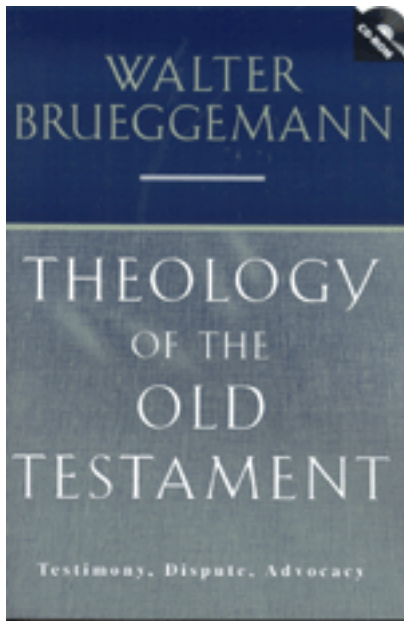


RBL 02/2006



Brueggemann, Walter

Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005. Pp. xxi + 777 + CD-ROM.
Paper. \$32.00. ISBN 0800637658.

Thomas J. Kraus

Hilpoltstein, Federal Republic of Germany D-91161

Those familiar with other works by Walter Brueggemann, William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament at Columbia, might also have the hardcover version of his *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*—originally published in 1997 by Fortress—in hand. This massive and weighty volume was almost universally acclaimed and enthusiastically received by scholars, as indicated by several praising reviews in the classic journals of the field. Some extracts from longer responses to Brueggemann’s *Theology* are printed on the very first page of the present paperback edition, followed by the impressive list of Brueggemann’s other books published by Fortress. Being confronted with these two initial pages, the readers of the new paperback edition may have high expectations of what to come on the next pages. To come to the most important point first here, they will not be disappointed.

It may be quite astounding that, after the book’s original publication eight years ago, the paperback edition “remains unchanged” (xiii). However, Brueggemann’s *Theology* has already become a kind of classic, and reworking such a heavy load of dense information and ideas could be a lifelong task. Furthermore, Brueggemann frankly and correctly states that just “a few major points in my argument might better have been the focus of my work” (xiii) before presenting them briefly. The stress is set on *just a few*, and thus this *Theology* could and should easily be mentioned together with other magisterial works

on Old Testament theology, above all those by Walther Eichrodt and—probably even more—by Gerhard von Rad (xv). Brueggemann’s *Theology* may even be regarded as a modern update of classical standard works, although it manifests the modern notion of how to assess the Old Testament without clinging to an often superficial and sometimes overdone criterion of “historicity” (see xiv).

Additional to and alongside the new “Preface to the CD-ROM Edition” (xiii–xiv; see below), the accompanying CD-ROM itself is a rewarding supplement to the hardcover edition. As a Macintosh user, I find it a nuisance that the CD-ROM is programmed for Microsoft platforms only and requires, among others, Microsoft Windows 98 or later. After putting the CD (edited by Rebecca J. Kruger Gaudino) into the drive of my old Microsoft notebook, the usefulness of this fine supplement became obvious. Supplied with the Libronix Digital Library System, the CD enables its user to perform complex searches, to set bookmarks and auto-footnotes, to take and save notes, and to highlight specific phrases or paragraphs. But that is not all. The CD deserves a closer look in order for readers of this review to see what they get. After entering the serial number, the user learns that Gaudino supplied the additional resources on the CD itself. First, the complete text of Brueggemann’s *Theology* is available, together with the *Theology of the Old Testament Study Guide*. The latter contains chapter summaries, a variety of questions for discussion and reflection, and Web links. Furthermore, Brueggemann’s *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* is also available. In broad terms, the screen is arranged as follows: the left half is filled by the table of contents of the complete *Theology*. Clicking on the chapter titles brings one directly to the relevant chapter, which is then shown in one of the windows of the right half. There the window is horizontally divided up into two smaller windows, one with the relevant chapter summary and the second with the running text of the *Theology*. It is very useful that the chapter summaries contain the page numbers for verbal quotes. When a user clicks on them, the appropriate text is shown in the second window of the right half. The user is supplied with several tools, such as *Strong’s Concordance*, *The Englishman’s Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance*, parallel Bible versions, and tables of weights and measures, to mention only a few. Furthermore, several search options turn the CD into a powerful resource that enables its users to find their way to the pieces of information they are looking for easily and within seconds. A spot check revealed the reliability of the data collected on the CD-ROM: I selected “topic search” from the menu and typed in “atonement.” Within a moment the results were shown: twenty-two occurrences in seven articles. Clicking on the given page numbers (here 193, 194, 248, 514, 582, 666, 667) proved the correctness of the search output. A cross-check against the printed text did not reveal any discrepancies. So even the programming seems to have been performed meticulously.

Of course, the CD-ROM will not surprise a scholar as far as insights, ideas, or results are concerned. Its usability and its pedagogical layout, however, may motivate students or even whole courses at colleges and/or universities to study the Old Testament more eagerly and enthusiastically. Above all, the questions provided may help students to reflect upon the often abstract and theological contents of some chapters more thoroughly.

On the whole, the book comprises five major parts and twenty-nine subchapters counted consecutively, although the first two subchapters do not belong to any of the major parts and are meant as introductory sections. These two chapters not only open the book but also show where Brueggemann himself stands and how he thinks of colleagues in the field, above all their theories. That is, in “Retrospect 1: From the Beginning to the End of a Generative Period” (1–60) and “Retrospect 2: The Contemporary Situation” (61–114) Brueggemann offers a kind of research report to illustrate clearly on whose shoulders he is standing and to whose objectives he is opposed. These two chapters alone are rewarding for those seeking a fluently written and well-balanced survey of the classic strains of Old Testament theology. Moreover, they could serve as a background to courses and seminars dealing with the Old Testament as a whole.

Then, in the first major part Brueggemann presents “Israel’s Core Testimony” (115–313), focusing, for instance, on “Testimony in Verbal Sentences,” “Adjectives,” and “Nouns” before changing the perspective to “Israel’s Countertestimony” (315–403) in part 2 with “The Hiddenness of Yahweh” and “Ambiguity and the Character of Yahweh,” to mention only two of five subchapters of this major part. His distinction between direct and positive statements about God—as *the* subjects of theology at all—and all others (e.g., questions, negative and ambiguous statements, sanctions, and theodicy) proves to be effective and enables readers to get think about God theologically from two different sides. The third major part—“Israel’s Unsolicited Testimony” (405–564)—concentrates on the different ways of partnering with Yahweh (Israel as a whole, individual human persons, the nations, and even creation, each of them the subject of a subchapter) and God’s encounters with groups and individuals.

Chapter 4 presents “Israel’s Embodied Testimony” (565–704) and deals with mediation, for example, by the king, the Torah, the cult, and the sage. Finally, in chapter 5 (“Prospects for Theological Interpretation” [705–50])—Brueggemann proposes new strains of discussions in Old Testament theology and indicates what these may be all about. Again and in a kind of a resumption of the dialogue he initiated at the beginning of this edition, he enters into a debate with other concepts of biblical and Old Testament theology in order to indicated that he refrains from setting any interpretation of a text as something absolute and solely correct. With this in mind, the attentive reader of the paperback edition immediately recognizes the advantages offered here in comparison to the 1997

edition. In his “Preface to the CD-ROM Edition” Brueggemann frankly admits that there are further aspects on which he could have focused more to produce a slightly altered edition. (1) He favors a “primary appeal to *testimony*, which consists in truth arising ‘from below’ [so that t]he more our knowledge of faith is democratized, the more testimony ‘from below’ is a source of fidelity.” (2) “The scheme of *testimony and counter-testimony* seems to me to be exactly correct,” which is “contrary to some current so-called ‘canonical perspective’ that continues to view the texts as a seamless whole.” (3) The significant work on YHWH’s partners, focusing on “the human person as partner,” can be a decisive regulating agent against any disastrous nationalism and provides a significant background for current pastoral theology. (4) The diverse, fresh Jewish-Christian readings are to be welcomed, and much work remains to be done in that field (xiii–xiv).

As noted earlier, Brueggemann criticizes *historicity* that often culminates in fact amounts and the so-called *canonical perspective*. Here it is helpful to keep in mind what he says about his most important guiding principles: testimony, dispute (witnesses must be cross-examined in order to achieve “an affirmed rendering of reality and an accepted version of truth”), and advocacy (“to advocate a rendering of truth and a version of reality that are urged over against other renderings and versions”; xvi–xvii).

Without doubt, this work can be used as a reference tool, a comprehensive resource book in the field (see the indices of scriptural references and names on 751–77). To fully understand or, to be more precise, to really sense what Brueggemann paints as a picture of Old Testament theology here, this volume should be read as a whole, from cover to cover, so that each new reflection on a certain issue might affect the reader’s own imagination and thus bring one closer to the people of the Old Testament, the believers and the communities. We will see in the next few decades whether Brueggemann’s *Theology* becomes a classic equal to Eichrodt’s or von Rad’s. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that Brueggemann—once more—has demonstrated his capacity to depict Old Testament theology at its best, far from the often abstract, theoretical, and occasionally artificial paths of other conceptions, and that he succeeds in presenting a theology that every scholar in the field must read before plunging into his or her own reflections about Old Testament theology.