Walter Brueggemann

*Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks*


LeAnn Snow Flesher
American Baptist Seminary of the West at The Graduate Theological Union Berkeley, California

Walter Brueggemann’s recent book, entitled *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks*, is a candid critique of two empires, one ancient and one modern. Using Judah’s response to the destruction of Jerusalem as a model, Brueggemann first imagines the process of the Judean elite shifting out of their confidence in the ideology of chosenness, into denial in the midst of the crisis that the ideology had failed, and eventually into despair when the denial was broken and the reality faced. He then goes on to describe the prophetic task of the Old Testament as the massive critical response to the crisis. He sees the Old Testament prophets doing three things: declaring the reality in the face of chosenness, voicing the grief in the face of denial, and proclaiming hope as a counter to despair.

Next Brueggemann imagines the same process for the US elite post-9/11. He views the US as a population that holds an ideology of exceptionalism, as a people that has shifted immediately into denial post-9/11 and ultimately into despair when the denial was broken and the reality faced. This new book then becomes the prophetic work/word to the US declaring the reality of the event(s) of 9/11, voicing the grief, and proposing the hope.

The three core chapters of the book are a thorough discussion of the matrix created: “Reality amid Ideology,” “Grief amid Denial,” and “Hope amid Despair.” Each chapter
begins with an analysis of the topic first from the perspective of the destruction of Jerusalem followed by the application of lessons learned there to the contemporary situation in post-9/11 US.

In the spirit of the prophet, Brueggemann makes it plain. Much like the structure of the oracles of judgment found in the book of Amos, Brueggemann first builds the argument that Judean leaders had become arrogant, developing a false consciousness that leaned on chosenness and covenant as guaranteed for perpetuity that caused them to leave behind commitments to the two greatest commands: to love God and to love neighbor. He then applies these same principles and ideas to the US, noting the false consciousness of exceptionalism that eventually led to an aggressive imperial policy under the presidency of Teddy Roosevelt (25). He clearly states that the US sense of exceptionalism has morphed into militarism, oligarchic rule, continued racism, and control of natural resources, markets, and supplies of cheap labor around the world (30–31). It seems we, too, have forgotten about love of God and love of neighbor.

In chapter 3 Brueggemann takes us even deeper into the God–Israel relationship. Emphasizing texts at the start from Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the first half of Zephaniah, Brueggemann notes that the prophets predicted the destruction of Jerusalem, and the elite did not heed their call. The elites “had been totally narcoticized by the ideology of chosenness” and could not see the possibilities for destruction (Jere 4:22). The God of Sinai had been reformulated into the patron God of Zion. The implication of this reformulation is that Judah articulated a God who would not act (Jer 5:12). The ruling elite were in charge; trusting in the perpetuity of the covenant, they no longer believed they would experience consequences for their behavior. God had become nothing more than a deity to be worshiped in the temple. In postdestruction Jerusalem, the displaced elite cried for vengeance (e.g., Pss 46, 74, 89) and “the lesser” folk left behind lamented (e.g., Lamentations). The book of Lamentations closes with ambiguous uncertainty—asking God to deliver if God has not utterly rejected (5:22). As Brueggemann notes, this is an enormous move away from the ideology of exceptionalism.

According to Brueggemann, post-9/11 US is still in denial with its claims that the attacks on our nation were the result of “our love of freedom.” Such a response does not acknowledge the components of our ideology of exceptionalism that still run strong, mainly our faith in our military force, economic dominance, superiority of white Euro-Americans, and “Christian values.” We maintain our denial, the purpose of which is to maintain old privilege and entitlement and to fend off the reality of the world. As result, we have a society today that is not working for a lot of people. The “not working” is held in place via violent practices and systems that order our society, such as an exploitative prison system, “stand your ground” laws, unrestrained gun lobby, agribusiness that
exploits the land, and acceptance of torture as a viable government procedure (77). The prophetic task for a culture in denial is to embrace, model, and practice grief so that the losses in life can be accepted. For the US this includes the loss of political-military hegemony, economic dominance, social-ethnic singularity, and ecclesiastical prosperity. In sum, we have lost the world for which we prepared ourselves. (81).

In chapter 4 Brueggemann notes that “the eruption of oracles of hope in the sixth century is one of the more remarkable and inexplicable features of the OT” (101). Israel’s prophets preached reality (woe oracles) and proclaimed the judgment of God but in the end brought words of hope for reconciliation and restoration. According to Brueggemann, the buoyant hopefulness of Yahwism guarded against total despair. Today in the US we are on the brink of despair. As a country in continued denial we deflect our fears and anger against groups that live among us: Muslims, immigrants, gays—as though one of these groups was the cause or agent of our loss (113). Our despair generating anxiety is acted out in various ways, of which Brueggemann names four: unrestrained greed, privatism, violence, and nostalgia for the good old days. The acting out of these anxieties leads to a pervasive sense of end time, which is played out through various streams of apocalyptic writings and films, including, of course, religious apocalypticism. Such preoccupation with end time is a clue that the current world is not viewed to be sustainable. In the midst of near despair, the prophetic task is to articulate hope.

In his final full chapter, entitled “Living amid Empire as Neighborhood,” Brueggemann declares that the US church, along with its ministry, is situated between two competing narratives that contradict each other: the totalizing narrative of empire and the particularizing narrative of neighborhood. These two narratives are intermingled and confused among us in ways that produce tension and conflict. Brueggemann outlines three ways in which the two narratives are commonly mingled: (1) the mantra of God and country in which the ideology of nationalism (in its present expression as a national security state) has been transposed into a gospel claim; (2) the intermingling of secular ideology with an evangelical façade in which market ideology is served and the worship of a “strong and free” America is the big dream; (3) the mantra of being “spiritual but not religious,” a mantra that leaves the status quo of society unchanged.

Throughout this final chapter Brueggemann provides a helpful review of key New Testament scholarly work in the area of Bible and empire as well as an in-depth explanation of neighborhood as the most elemental unit of social meaning in the Bible. The contrast between the two meta-narratives of empire and neighborhood is significant. For example, Brueggemann points out that the contrast between empire, where all flows to the top, is sharp when compared to the miracles of abundance that are unexpectedly given to the lowly in the biblical narratives. He claims that Jesus both exposes the
inadequacy of empire and gives an invitation to the neighborhood (146). He builds his argument by highlighting “the law of Christ” as the law of the crucified one who is other (Gal 6:2, 14). The law of Christ builds community not through trying to take advantage of one another but through bearing one another’s burdens. He concludes that “love of neighbor as yourself” is the complete fulfillment of Torah and the law of Christ (149).

Brueggemann closes this chapter by calling the church back to its original calling to love neighbor as oneself and to discontinue participation in the rat race that is indispensable for the maintaining of empire, as it seduces us into imagining that we can win and succeed. He points out that the market is not at all even-handed but works to the advantage of those who are already advantaged and to the disadvantage of those already disadvantaged. In other words, it creates class warfare, US exceptionalism with its tinge of evangelical approval is the “Authorized Version” of the common life in our society. It is time for a “New Revised Standard Version” of reality, a subversion that arises in the particularity of practice (152).

In his final summation Brueggemann brings it all home with full explication of his interpretive moves. Simply stated, the narrative of empire is ideology, denial, despair. The narrative of neighborhood is realism, grief, hope. We continue to believe that somehow the two can intermingle and be at peace with each other, but of course they cannot. Brueggemann’s work in this volume has brought a new profundity to the phrase “You cannot serve God and Wealth” (Matt 6:24).

Throughout his career Brueggemann has been a prolific writer. Those of us who have read his books and articles will find many of his ideas and themes artfully woven together in this recent exposition as he makes clear statements pertaining to the core beliefs of choseness, by ancient Israel, and exceptionalism by pre-9/11 US. Fundamentally, I read this book as prophetic exhortation to the church to get off its complacent duff and claim the worldview outlined by Jesus in the New Testament through the recitation of the two greatest commands: love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. Brueggemann has set the second of these commands in contrast to our current commitments to empire ideology that includes: “enlightenment reason, market ideology, and political exceptionalism.” He has provided profound interpretation of Old Testament texts that evidence the ideology of choseness in the Judean elite and the effects of this ideology on the process of coping with the destruction of Jerusalem in the sixth century. He has drawn pointed and logical parallels of Judah’s ideology to that of the US as we respond to the events of 9/11.

Through this analysis Brueggemann has ferreted out the tension(s) between the two dominant narratives of empire and neighborhood and concluded with the call for the church and its ministries to do the work of the prophet: to address the reality of an
unsustainable ideology of exceptionalism, lead the people in a process of grief over the loss of the possible fulfillment of this ideology, and bring an imaginative word of hope for reconciliation and restoration. There are many, both inside and outside the church, who will find this book appalling. Such is the work of the prophet! Personally, I find this work to be on point. Walter Brueggemann bravely addresses the evils of two empires, one ancient and one contemporary. He pulls no punches, does not hold back. And he calls the church to stand up and claim its prophetic heritage: to proclaim the good news of the “law of Christ” and to lead the way by living out the second greatest command: love your neighbor as yourself.