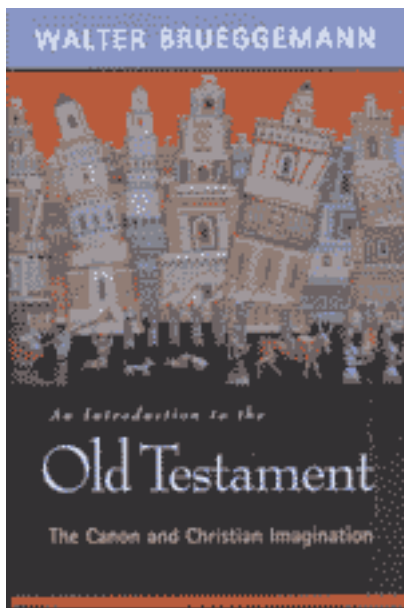


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Brueggemann, Walter

An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003. Pp. xiv + 434. Paper. \$24.95. ISBN 0664224121.

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Is there a need for another introduction to the Old Testament? Indeed, there is an urgent need for an introduction in the way Walter Brueggemann has written it. It is a pleasure and a fruitful enterprise to read this basic book on the Old Testament, a most helpful and motivating tool for beginners in biblical studies as well as for scholars who want a brief but sound and comprehensive introduction to the state of the art of biblical hermeneutics at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Although Brueggemann stands in an ongoing debate with the scholarly literature, documented at times by names of scholars and by the selected bibliography (403–17), he does not bother the reader with too much name-dropping. For those acquainted with the current discussions and the older positions in Old Testament exegesis, Brueggemann’s presentation is a welcome description of the shift of paradigms that has taken place in recent decades. He always looks back at “older scholarship” and its positions, especially the historical-critical approaches, and then demonstrates the differences and achievements of the newer approaches and methods. While historical-critical studies on the Old Testament are mainly a highly academic enterprise for “experts,” Brueggemann assumes that canonical, rhetorical, and sociological approaches come more readily in contact with the milieu of the contemporary interpretive community of the church (xi).

In his preface Brueggemann describes his own effort “to mediate and make available fresh learnings of Old Testament studies that will be of peculiar force for pastors and Christian congregations” (xi). This is the audience Brueggemann mainly has in mind and which he certainly will reach in the way he writes and structures his material. However, this reviewer recommends the book to a wider audience, including students beginning with Bible studies in college and graduate school as well as interested laypersons who are acquainted with the Bible but want to learn more about the innerbiblical connections and coherences.

Brueggemann further admits that he learned a great deal from the canonical approach of Brevard Childs (xii), but one very soon gets the impression that Brueggemann goes far beyond the position of Childs. Later on in the book he explicitly states that his own approach differs in important ways from that of Childs (see 393–94). Brueggemann sees the canonizing process as a vigorous one, but not as singular as Childs thinks, and he points to the term “canonizing tendency” coined by J. A. Sanders, “but a tendency that did not run roughshod over ancient textual claims and one that did not completely impose itself upon the ongoing textual tradition” (394). For Brueggemann, the Old Testament is canonical in its rich variegation: the polyvalence of the text itself is an important part of the canonical claim (see *ibid.*).

The outline of the book follows mainly the tripartite Hebrew canon; each book of the Tanak gets a chapter of its own (Genesis is split up into chs. 1–11 and 12–50; the Book of the Twelve covers two chapters, the Megilloth are collected into to one chapter). An introduction clarifies Brueggemann’s hermeneutical point of departure. Each of the three parts of the canon (Torah, Prophets, Writings) is framed by a general prologue and a “reprise.” A concluding reflection harks back to the introduction.

Brueggemann’s introduction, with the title “imaginative remembering,” summarizes his hermeneutics and his position concerning the task of writing an “introduction to the Old Testament.” This part is probably most important for the scholarly discussion. First, he reflects on the term “Old Testament” and rejects any misunderstandings of it in a sense of supersessionism. A Christian reading of the Old Testament always must keep in mind that the Jewish reading is likewise faithful to the text and is to be taken with equal seriousness. Christians are “coreaders” with Jews (2). Furthermore, the term “old” may not be misunderstood as “obsolete,” since the Old Testament is indispensably important in a Christian reading of the New Testament. Brueggemann also speaks about the difficulty and the wonder of the church’s relation to Judaism, a problem already discussed by Paul in Rom 9–11.

As a suggestion for further discussion, the reviewer dares to ask at this moment whether one could (or should) not use the terminology and the resulting “Bibles” more consequently. The “Old Testament” of the Christian church simply is not purely identical with the “Tanak” of Judaism. The early church chose the Septuagint as the main witness of its holy writings, and the different arrangement (and extent) bears several consequences on a canonical interpretation. Another idea for more terminological precision would be to limit the term “Old Testament” explicitly to a *Christian* reading and interpretation of the text, while “Tanak” would then indicate an interpretation within the Jewish context and communities. Hence, in view of these considerations it seems a little inconsistent to use the arrangement and sequence of the Jewish Bible (Tanak) while reading it from a Christian perspective. In other words, a canonical interpretation of Scripture always needs to clarify which Bible (arrangement, extent, and community of faith) is the basis for the interpretation. This is a point the reviewer misses in Brueggemann’s presentation. Although the author discusses the matter of canon on pages 4–7, including a short remark on the Septuagint, a brief discussion about the different arrangements of Christian Old Testament and Jewish Tanak (perhaps including a chart) would have been helpful.

Brueggemann’s introduction to this volume continues with remarks about the basic periods of the history of ancient Israel. He immediately makes clear that the Old Testament is by far not an immediate source to reconstruct “what happened.” “What we have in the Old Testament, rather than reportage, is a sustained memory that has been filtered through many generations of the interpretive process, with many interpreters imposing certain theological intentionalities on the memory that continues to be reformulated” (4). The terms *memory* and *remembering* become very important in Brueggemann’s expositions. As an example, he points to the exodus narrative. It surely has behind it some defining emancipatory happening, to which we, however, have no access. Much more important than the actual incident is the process of remembering: “This act of *imaginative remembering*, I believe, is the clue to valuing the Bible as trustworthy voice of faith while still taking seriously our best critical learning” (8). One cannot precisely reconstruct the formation of the Bible and the canon—a point Brueggemann often underscores—but it is clear that this process was not simply an addition of “documents” or “sources,” as the older historical-critical approach assumed, but rather a dynamic interaction of traditions of various kinds of theological interpretation of history and the conditions of human life. The texts are not a descriptive reportage of a common-sense world but the result of an act of imagination: many biblical texts reach beyond the common sense and develop the world of YHWH as it should be or as it will come to be.

In sum, Brueggemann sees three factors in the traditioning process: imagination, ideology, and inspiration. They do not cohere easily with each other, and that makes the interpretation of the Old Testament “complex and problematic, endlessly interesting and compelling” (11). Hence, the traditional process can never be concluded, “because the text is endlessly needful of new rendering” (ibid.).

The bulk of Brueggemann’s helpful study tool introduces the parts of the Hebrew canon (Tanak) and every single book under the portents mentioned above. Through his learned retelling of the contents, paying broad attention to the overall coherence of the texts and books, the reader gets important insights into the larger compositional lines. There is indeed a need for such a kind of introduction, especially designed for pastors, teachers, and church communities, because the usual way of hearing (!) scripture in the liturgy runs the risk of giving one only a fragmented and one-sided impression of the content and style of the Bible. Brueggemann’s introductions to the individual books provide brief and necessary information that enables an intelligent and fruitful reading of the biblical text as a whole.

As an example, consider the outline of the introduction to the book of Psalms (277–91). Brueggemann introduces the Psalms, with Gerhard von Rad, as Israel’s response to God’s miraculous interventions as Creator and covenant maker. After a word about the five books of the Psalter and earlier collections, he asserts how difficult, if not impossible, it is to situate each psalm in a particular historical context. The bulk of this chapter is dedicated to the presentation of Hermann Gunkel’s genre research, thus providing examples (quotations) for hymns, communal laments, individual laments, and individual songs of thanksgiving. As important themes for current Psalms study, Brueggemann identifies the “Jerusalem accent,” the cosmic themes of creation, and the Psalms’ liturgical usage. In his own approach he sorts the psalms according to the immediate dynamics of lived human reality, using the labels *orientation–disorientation–new orientation*. At the end Brueggemann points to a new impetus in Psalms study concerning the canonical placement of the Psalms, that is, the arrangement of the psalms in the Psalter and its implications for interpreting the individual psalm or groups of psalms. Here he refers especially to the works of G. Wilson (1985), J. C. McCann (1993), and P. D. Miller (2000). However, the few examples Brueggemann offers here do not represent all that is possible in this new approach. Unfortunately, he does not refer to important studies in German languages such as several articles by Erich Zenger and the comprehensive study of Matthias Millard, *Die Komposition des Psalters: Ein formgeschichtlicher Ansatz* (FAT 9; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994). It is obvious that the audience in mind is probably only an English-speaking one. A German reviewer may point here to the important *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* edited by Erich Zenger (4th ed.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001).

Brueggemann is well known for writing with energy and freshness, and again this introduction fits well with his other successful studies and books. One may also relate this introduction, which focuses with its structure on the individual books of the Old Testament, to Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), which is structured, rather, according to a chronological order of Old Testament literature and the main theological issues within the history of Israelite religion. Both books, however, more or less share the same hermeneutical approach that is sketched above.

Brueggemann's introduction to the Old Testament enriches the scholarly debate about the hermeneutics of the Jewish and the Christian Bible(s) as well as about methodology and the relevance of Old Testament exegesis. At the same time, this book is an important contribution for Christian congregations, for theological seminaries, pastors, teachers, and interested laypeople to receive significant help in introducing the Scriptures of old to modern times. Books of such a kind show that Old Testament scholarship is effective and an important part in the academic world with a relevant impact on our culture of today.