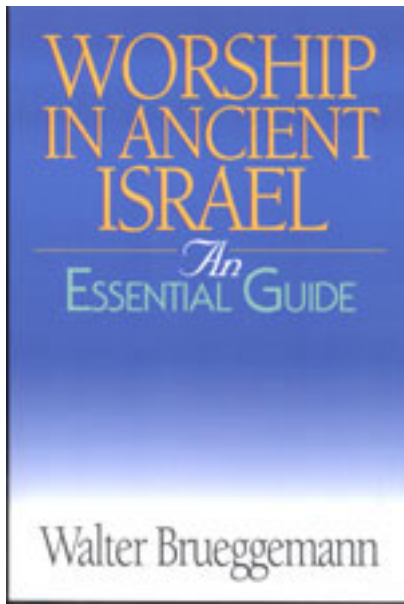


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Worship in Ancient Israel: An Essential Guide

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Walter Brueggemann is once again to be praised for his highly accessible style and his ability to present the essentials of a theme of biblical theology in a brief but substantive introduction. As is characteristic of this distinguished Old Testament scholar, Brueggemann writes in an engaging style, always pointing to current theological and practical issues concerning the church in its ecumenical character. Hence, this book is primarily intended for a broad audience, but also the academic world of biblical studies may profit from Brueggemann's didactic summary of the themes, central texts, prayers, festivals, and practices of Israel's worship.

Brueggemann dedicates the small book to Patrick D. Miller, and he admits in the acknowledgements that the study is very much informed by and derivative from Miller's two books *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) and *They Cried to the Lord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). As the notes section (87–100) indicates, Brueggemann has considered many other works as well, such as those by Roland de Vaux, Norbert Lohfink, Rainer Albertz, Erhard Gerstenberger, and Walter Harrelson.

What Brueggemann does not want to present here is a summary of the results of "history of religion"; that is, he does not show how the practices of worship have been ordered

and shaped over time in various contexts. He readily admits that Israelite worship practices developed significantly over long periods and that there never was a single practice at a given time but rather a variety of forms and texts, “a pluriform practice upon which no uniformity could be imposed and from which no simplistic practice could emerge” (3). What Brueggemann focuses on in his study is the constant, normative, and pervasive in order to find out the primal claims of worship practice in every context in Israel.

In his first of five chapters, Brueggemann summarizes the six accents with which P. D. Miller characterizes “orthodox Yahwism.” This is an attempt to find out Israel’s *proprium* within the complex evidence of religious phenomena in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East. Special attention is paid to the aspects of exclusive worship and aniconicity. These two marks finally eventuated in monotheism, “but the exclusionary claim of YHWH is for a long time asserted before any formal claim of monotheism is ever voiced in Israel” (6–7). This idea is closely connected to the peculiar character of YHWH as a God in relation: the Old Testament does not say much about God per se but rather about God in relation—and this relationship is usually termed “covenant,” a bilateral relationship between YHWH and Israel. Worship, then, is to be understood as a practice of covenant: “words and gestures by which Israel regularly resituates its life in the ongoing narrative of YHWH who creates, judges, and rescues” (8). Hence, worship consists of a dialogic transaction that can happen in a rich variety of ways: “worship in Israel consists in a dialogic interaction in which both parties are fully present” (9). According to this key issue, the other chapters deal with the gestures of worship and sacrifices (ch. 2), the utterances of YHWH (ch. 3), and those of Israel (ch. 4). The final chapter presents seven basic tensions that are characteristic of Israel’s worship.

In his second chapter, Brueggemann stresses the observation that, regarding the acts of worship, the Old Testament “is much more upon *the thing done* than upon *the meaning* of the thing done” (11). Hence, the materiality of worship is an exceedingly powerful facet. Brueggemann deals with the two defining acts of public worship in Israel: the celebration of festivals and the offering of sacrifices. First he analyzes the festal calendars of the Old Testament, regarding Exod 23:14–17 (augmented by vv. 10–13) as the oldest. Already here one can note an alertness to profound human need: in the seventh year, the Israelites were to let the land rest and lie fallow, so that the poor could eat. This care for the poor and the rest for the home-born slave and the resident alien on the Sabbath stood “at the beginning of a trajectory indicating that worship is never an end in itself” (13). The other festal calendars likewise show traces of the care for the poor. Another, most important characteristic feature of the festivals is the observation that “this distinctive community of YHWH must live out in visible, palpable, material ways—in thick, freighted symbolization—the peculiar, defining mark of covenant” (16). Without regular, public,

visible symbolization, the community of Israel would soon disappear. Regarding the offering of sacrifices, the same intention remained operative despite the long history and the many developments and changes: “to interact with and respond to YHWH in ways that maintain, enhance, or reconstitute a covenantal relationship with YHWH” (20). Here Brueggemann touches the core of the offering of sacrifices. Quite rightly he observes that almost nothing is said that explains the meaning of sacrifice—most of the attention is paid to the public gesture, the action itself. This leaves the sacrifice open to a variety of interpretations. A second characteristic feature of sacrifices is the efficaciousness of the act in itself: by the very process of the act, the relationship between the two covenant partners became something that it was not prior to the act.

Chapters 3 and 4 cover the utterances of YHWH and Israel in worship. This outline of the study is a direct consequence of the basic assumption about worship in ancient Israel: it is a dialogue in which both parties have their say. The utterances of YHWH consist on the one hand of commandments, on the other of guidance and assurance. It is the “God of Sinai” that Israel meets in worship, and the meeting at Sinai is the model for subsequent worship assemblies in Israel. Brueggemann also points to the idea of Deuteronomy as “preached law” (G. von Rad) and to the model of a worship service in Neh 8. Next, Brueggemann quotes texts especially from the Psalms and the Prophets in order to show how YHWH uttered oracles of assurance. These texts show that YHWH was known to be palpably present in and engaged on behalf of the community.

The larger fourth chapter summarizes Israel’s utterances in worship. Here Brueggemann points out that Israel at worship was not docile, passive, or silent. He names three types of utterances: (1) acts of remembering, such as the historical “credos” or the narrative psalms; (2) praise, “the exuberant rhetorical act of gladly ceding one’s life and the life of the world over to YHWH in joyous self-abandonment” (43); and (3) truth-telling about Israel’s life in confession, lament, and protest. “This feature of Israel’s rhetoric is a most decisive mark of Israel’s worship” (47). Brueggemann deals here with psalms expressing a confession of sin in those cases where Israel failed to honor the covenant. On the other hand, there are also psalms of lament and protest that utter in dramatic ways helplessness and rage about YHWH’s failure to fulfill the covenant. Brueggemann admits the problems that today’s Christian communities may have with such language, but he rightly points to the basic issue that the covenantal relationship makes it necessary that Israel be free to express the truth about its distress. Brueggemann demonstrates how finally the utterances of Israel in worship lead to petition and its completion, thanksgiving. He concludes: “All of these texts evidence that Israel had a regular liturgical procedure whereby it gave public, dramatic testimony that its life and well-being were free gifts of YHWH who responded attentively and powerfully to Israel’s need. The act of thanks is public and material” (57–58).

In his final discussion (ch. 5), Brueggemann considers seven tensions operating in Israel's worship. These "poles" are not necessarily opposites and do not exclude each other. Brueggemann rather speaks of a "play" in the sense of the slippage in the turning of a steering wheel in a car. Worship in Israel navigates in the ambiguity between these points. (1) Obedience and freedom: loyalty to YHWH's Torah is no flat submissiveness but rather a work of great freedom in a responsible interpretation of the Torah. (2) Holiness and justice: the zeal for holiness in the cult does not exclude but rather requires a passion for justice in society and economy, that is, permanent care for the poor. (3) State cult and the worship of family and clan: Both expressions of worship, in private circles as well as the official cult at the temple in Jerusalem, need to be taken seriously. (4) Torah and king: The cipher "Torah" here stands for a conditioned covenant ("if" Israel fulfills the Torah), while the "king" (i.e., "David") stands for an unconditioned promise of God's presence (2 Sam 7:15); both aspects need to be seen together. (5) Presence and absence: Israel's worship is based on a granted presence of YHWH, but it also suffers at times from the experience of absence, expressed in the tradition of lament. (6) Praise and lament: The presence and absence of YHWH result in corresponding texts that either celebrate God's active help or lament about YHWH's silence and absence; hence the Psalms, Israel's characteristic utterance in worship, are the voice of extremity (see 79). (7) Memory and hope: Israel's worship is an act of intentional remembering, but it is not an escape in nostalgia. "Israel's remembering is clearly grounded in the conviction that what has been attested from the past is the clue to the future" (80). Remembering God's good deeds to the people in the past is a permanent source of hope, even in a present full of distress.

Brueggemann's "essential guide" is a handy tool in order to become acquainted with the basic issues of worship in ancient Israel. The book provides a well-organized overview of the many theological facets of this major theme of biblical theology.