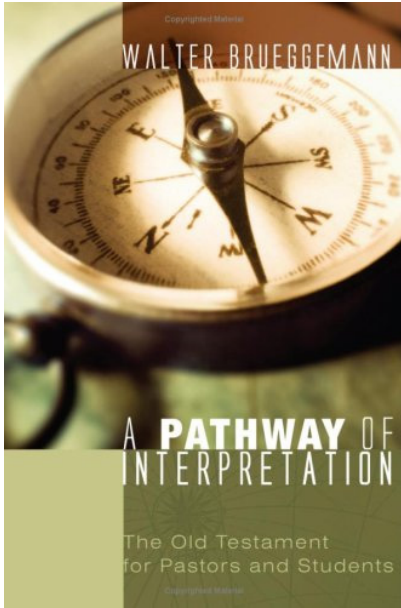


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Brueggemann, Walter

A Pathway of Interpretation: The Old Testament for Pastors and Students

Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2009. Pp. 180. Paper. \$21.00.
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With this slim book, Brueggemann seeks to provide a simplified resource to equip and empower seminarians and pastors to interpret the Old Testament for the contemporary church. The main advantage of this book is its streamlined approach that is targeted to the typical expertise of pastors and seminarians by assuming little or no knowledge of Hebrew or textual criticism. The result is a basic three-step method that allows nonspecialists to do biblical interpretation “on the run” without getting sidetracked into specialized topics or issues. This intent distinguishes this book from many of the currently available exegetical handbooks and resources for Old Testament study, which all too often give focused attention to specialized topics or issues. While important for the scholarly guild, these resources are mostly intended for training for academia and are not necessarily readily accessible or helpful for nonspecialist study of the Old Testament.

The core of the book (chs. 3–6) consists of a presentation of a three-step method: rhetorical analysis, key word analysis, and social analysis (ch. 3), followed by an application of this method to a variety of narrative, psalmic, and prophetic passages from the Old Testament. Throughout, Brueggemann shows that the three-step approach is not merely a rigid system but rather provides both structure and flexibility to discern the rhetorical artistry of the text and its claims for contemporary communities of faith.

The preliminary portion of the book (preface and chs. 1–2) and conclusion (ch. 9) consist of a theoretical discussion of Old Testament hermeneutics presented through Brueggemann’s fascinating reflection on how his personal religious and academic history has conditioned his ideology and interpretative approaches. In this way, Brueggemann uses himself as an example to demonstrate the importance of the interpreter to have an explicit awareness of her prior conditioning due to religious heritage and academic training that impacts the process of interpretation. This section can be safely skipped by those who are already familiar with Brueggemann’s approach or who would like to begin immediately with Brueggemann’s exegetical method. Those who are not familiar with Brueggemann’s method will appreciate his explicit and candid reflection on how his approach is essentially a hybrid of the methods established by J. Muilenberg and N. Gottwald that results in a text-centered method that attends to both the rhetoric and social ideology of text. For Brueggemann, an essential prerequisite to the task of interpretation is the urgent need for interpreters to attain an awareness of the role of ideology (both ancient and modern) in interpretation as well as to establish an attitude of a readiness to hear the text, to discern its radical claim centered around the confession of the reality of God, and to be led by its alternate vision and voice.

The book closes with a discussion of secondary resources (ch. 8) and a classified reading list to assist the pastor or teacher in obtaining quality resources to aid the task of exegesis. These resources are standard works in the field that will benefit the nonspecialist interpreter of the Old Testament. However, the section on social analysis is much too long in comparison with the other categories to be helpful and can be pruned down to shorter size. Importance resources not included that would be helpful to pastors include *Life in Biblical Israel*, by Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager (Westminster John Knox, 2001) as well as the standard lexicons and theological dictionaries. The omission of the latter is quite surprising, given the importance ascribed to word studies in this book.

Although the book promises to be a helpful resource, the actual product falls short of its intended vision. The bulk of the book is essentially a reworking of previously published essays have been integrated into the book into a way that is not cohesive or consistent. Chapter 6, for example, refers to the third step as “Advocacy” instead of the usual designation “Social Analysis.” A major inconsistency is the relationship between the book and the previously published essays. The discussion of Gen 50 in chapter 4 refers to the “original essay” and previous “paper” with no explicit citation of the 1983 essay “Genesis 50:15–20: A Theological Exploration.” This is in contrast to chapter 5, which cites the original 1990 ZAW essay “1 Samuel 1: A Sense of a Beginning.” However, the third and programmatic chapter in this book that introduces the three-step method fails to cite or indicate that the material was previously published by *Interpretation* (“That the World May be Redescribed” *Int* 56 [2002]: 359–67). Hence, it is unclear if the remaining material

in this book has been previously published or represents new material composed for this book.

Chapter 7 is the most problematic section of the book, in that it is an awkward reuse of an essay previously published in a Festschrift for James Crenshaw. This chapter exhibits a first-draft quality. The introductory pages are disjointed and convoluted, the rest of the chapter fails to follow the three-step method, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of specialized theological issues that appears to undermine the intention of the book by focusing on more specialized issues that are tangential to hearing the claims of the text. Only a careful rereading of this chapter has allowed me to discern that the main goal of this chapter is how to do constructive theology without destroying the integrity of individual texts. This is an important and problematic move that could have been made in a clearer and more consistent manner by first applying the three-step method to the four texts of divine abandonment (Ps 22; Lam 5; Isa 49; 54) and then struggle to bring the texts into conversation.

Finally, the book requires additional copyediting. Major typographical errors include “site other usages” (44) and “Israel’s capacity to count on YHWH’s liability” (should be “reliability”; 81), and various minor errors appear throughout (e.g., Mc Neil [xxiv n. 29], extraneous space before a comma in the next to last line on 46, the reference to Lam 2:20–22 should be 5:20–22 [99], and failure to italicize a book title completely [118 n. 1]). The reuse of previously published material has resulted in sections that need further editing. For example, note 23 on page 107 seems to be an awkward combination of two notes from the source material that also fails to give a page citation.

Regardless of its shortcomings, this is a book I wished I had owned during my seminary years. These criticisms are offered in hopes of a much improved and vastly revised second edition that will serve the intended purpose clearer. It is suggested that a second edition would devote more attention to equipping pastors and students on the actual process of doing a word study and especially the difficult but crucial dimension of social analysis. Perhaps readers can be encouraged to do their own work, which can be compared to Brueggemann’s results (or perhaps to a sampling of results from his classroom experience to give a sense of the richness and thickness of the text?). And if the church is the ideal arena for biblical interpretation, according to Brueggemann, it might also be helpful to give attention to how lay members of the church with no seminary training can be equipped with tools for biblical interpretation.

The most valuable aspect of this book is the heuristically and pedagogically useful three-step approach that allows the text to have its own hearing and bibliography of quality resources. Although written primarily for pastors and students and not for scholars or

specialists, it takes seriously the results of critical biblical scholarship, especially important advances made in recent decades on the rhetorical and sociological aspects of the text. The book demonstrates how a serious regard for the results of historical-critical study of the Bible can work in tandem with a commitment to the authority of the biblical text and its claim of the reality and centrality of God. Perhaps most important, the book demonstrates the need for an imaginative, artful approach to the text that cannot be fully described or captured in any rigid scheme of interpretation.

This book will provide a useful resource and agenda for any graduate or upper-level undergraduate class or seminar related to Old Testament exegesis. Seminars and class projects could use the book to introduce students to the three-step method and require students to apply the method in a collaborative setting. This book also promises to guide the self-motivated and seminary-trained pastor who is looking for a resource for continuing study of the Old Testament to reflect and wrestle with the claims of the text.