

‘Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth’

Tribute to Walter Brueggemann (1933-2025)

The title referenced above is from a prayer book by one of the most influential theologians of our time, Walter Brueggemann. A prolific Old Testament scholar, Brueggemann’s life and witness remarkably extends beyond the academic world, resonating deeply within the contemporary church. Brueggemann’s passing away on 05th June 2025 marks the end of a remarkable earthly journey of a devoted Christian aged 92 years, but his writings and witness will continue to influence generations that will live far beyond his years. This essay is a humble tribute to the stalwart who held all of us together in the journey of Old Testament studies for a long period of time through his teachings, writings, sermons and prayers, to name a few. It is impossible to cover all the methodological paradigms and the themes spread across his 100 plus books in an essay like this. But an attempt is made to locate the trajectories beginning from childhood traversing through his commitment towards ministry and church, influences that shaped his theological formation, the main thrusts of his biblical interpretation, the relevance of Brueggemann in the Indian context today and culminating with ‘doxology’, a word that he cherished close to his heart. Each trajectory is informed by a prayer, which Brueggemann himself carefully crafted before each class and offered in utmost humility, which inspires us to learn that what happens in class room is not just transformation of information, but is an exercise layered in faith, obedience and praise.

Scene 1: There is a time to be born, and it is now

“There is a time to be born and a time to die.

And this is a time to be born.

So, we turn to you, God of our life,

God of all our years,

God of our beginning. Our times are in your hand”

(Epiphany: January 7, 1997)

Brueggemann was born on March 11, 1933 to Rev. August L. Brueggemann, a German Evangelical pastor and Hilda Hallmann in Tilden, Nebraska. He often spoke about the influence of his father during the childhood days and the marginalization he had to face as a pastor’s child. In Brueggemann’s biography written by Conrad L. Kanagy, we read as follows,

“In the German communities of Missouri, the pastor was always an outsider and never welcomed entirely into the network of families. Members needed their pastor to be distant. When they required his ministry, they wanted a pastor, not a friend. Since his childhood in Blackburn, Missouri, as the son of a poorly educated and poorly paid preacher, Brueggemann had been aware of this sense that he was always behind everyone else. With only thirty students in his high school and just one shelf of books that he read and read again, Brueggemann relied upon others to subsidize his meagre educational opportunities. But the advantage of working from behind meant that Walter was always working on getting ahead”.

While he was a teenager, Brueggemann and his brother would visit a black church near to the town with the permission of their father and that helped them to get insight into the lives of people different from them. This probably led and influenced Brueggemann to take up the cause of marginalised communities and to raise voice for their concerns in the latter years. Brueggemann considered his father to be his “first and best teacher.” At his confirmation, August picked as his son’s confirmation Bible verse Psalm 119:105, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” which in later years turned to be the decisive factor that shaped Brueggemann’s life and career.

Scene 2: Move us beyond ourselves

“Holy God who calls the worlds into being, who calls us into Christ’s church;

We thank you for the church that is our true home;

For the mission of the church that is our true joy, and

For the ministry of the church that is our proper task.

We thank you for the ministry of the church in this place,

For pastors and people who over time have named your name and lived your life”.

(For the ordination of Rebecca Gaudino/ November 10, 1996)

Brueggemann grew up with some resentment toward the church that kept his father poor when its members had resources with which they could have paid him more. Kanagy observes that Brueggemann’s attentiveness to those in poverty and marginalised situations were profoundly personal and grew out of the pain he felt from the economic injustices experienced by his father. Kanagy says, “In Brueggemann’s teenage mind, his father’s poverty was not necessary but was due to the parsimoniousness and grudging behaviour of the people August served. They gave August his marching orders and he slowly fought back, but Brueggemann felt deeply inferior

and disadvantaged, and something about that inferiority was under his skin. He would always remain in touch with that insecurity and his father's pain".

Raised in limited material resources did not deter Brueggemann away from faith or the ministry of the church. He loved the church and always felt that his vocation was to build the kingdom of God through the ministry of the church. Kanagy observes that "While teaching in a seminary environment, Brueggemann always felt like an outsider among the giants of the field from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, among others. He felt inferior because of his midwestern roots in rural Missouri, his lack of knowledge and fluency in German and the languages of the antiquities, and his decision to primarily publish his work for pastors and church audiences. This meant that his work, written for church practitioners and not scholars, sometimes failed to include the jargonise, nuancing, and denseness that validated high achievement in academia. These were all intentional decisions on his part to always teach at seminaries, to train pastors, and to serve the church over the academy". Brueggemann eventually rose to the position of President of SBL which was an affirmation to all the seminary professors and communicated the message to the university divinity schools that even a seminary professor could decorate the prime position in the league of biblical scholars.

Scene 3: We are not self-starters

**"We come petitioning one more time,
Seeking your majestic address to us,
Asking your powerful action among us,
Waiting for your new life toward us".**

(Chapel/ February5, 1990)

Brueggemann's professional, historical, and cultural contexts have shaped his theologizing. On a professional level, Brueggemann's theological refection has been formed in the context of seminaries. He was educated in Sociology at Elmhurst College (1955), Eden Theological Seminary (B.D., 1958) and ordained in St. Paul's UCC, Blackburn, Missouri on June 29, 1958. He continued his education at Union Theological Seminary (Th.D., 1961) and St. Louis University (Ph.D., 1974). He taught on the faculty at Eden, 1961–1986, and at Columbia Theological Seminary, 1986–2003. Throughout the career, Brueggemann attempted to dialogue between the theology and the church keeping the word of God as the interpretive lens.

Brueggemann is widely recognized as a scholar with a “commitment to stay within the church while offering strong prophetic critiques to its imperial allegiances”.

Brueggemann manifests keen awareness of his historical and cultural contexts and how they shaped his theological work. He states in ‘Theology of the Old Testament’ that he is doing “local” theology for a specific group of readers the church in the capitalist West. “Our context within which to consider the viability of the Old Testament theology is the wider social context of the West, where another metanarrative is more powerful and compelling”. He names this competing metanarrative “military consumerism.” Rachel L. Coleman observes that Brueggemann’s early years as a scholar coincided with the tumult of the Civil Rights era and the Vietnam War, an historical period that was the perfect incubator for his growing dissatisfaction with this controlling narrative of Western culture.

Scene 4: Re-text us

“Give us attentive ears, responsive hearts, receiving hands,

Re-text us to be your liberated partners”

(Montreat Conference/ May 30, 2000)

Brueggemann’s understanding of the biblical text was influenced greatly by his doctoral mentor James Muilenburg, who introduced him to rhetorical interpretation as an alternative to the dominant historical-critical method, which both Muilenburg and his students found static and didn’t speak to modern concerns.

Brueggemann affirmed the need to let the Bible speak in its own terms and categories which was already rooted in the interpretation of Karl Barth. Brueggemann points to Barth’s commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans as a pivotal point in biblical interpretation. Barth’s interpretation of the biblical text emphasized the importance of rhetoric and the relationship between speech and reality. The importance of faith as a starting point for theological inquiry, the role of rhetoric, the relationship between speech and reality and the dialectical nature of the biblical text remain important themes in the Old Testament interpretation of Brueggemann.

The power of the text to evoke an alternative reality lies in both the rhetoric of the text and in the imagination of the reading community. Brueggemann insists that imagination is a “crucial

ingredient” for Israel because it is through imagination that rhetoric has the power to evoke, generate and create alternative realities. Imagination however has not been highly regarded by historical critical methodology.

Scene 5: How you inhabit this text

**“And now we come with this strange text,
All its jots and tittles,
All its points and pauses,
Imagining that your splendour is given us in primal ways”
(At the beginning of term in Hebrew readings/ February 6, 2001)**

According to Brueggemann, majority of the Old Testament scholars believe that texts of the Old Testament did not receive their final form until the sixth century BCE or later. This suggests that much of the Old Testament was shaped during, and in response to, the Babylonian exile- a period of deep crisis for Israel. The exile represented the collapse of Israel’s political and social systems and raised serious doubts about the foundations of their faith. Brueggemann argues that these crises and the life situations and challenges they faced served as the primary catalyst for the creation of the biblical writings during that era.

The exile not only prompted Israel’s theologians to grapple with the collapse of their institutions, but, as Brueggemann argues, it also became the foundational framework through which they understood their faith. The writings that emerged in response to the exile were deeply influenced by it. These texts reflect the sense of vulnerability and uncertainty that came to define Israel’s identity during and after the exile. Additionally, expressing faith in such a context required bold, imaginative visions that challenged the harsh realities of their time.

According to Brueggemann, the theme of exile and homecoming are formative for both Israel’s faith and the Old Testament texts that were shaped by the subsequent incidents. The exile thus served as a “paradigmatic event” for Israel. This means that the exile does not remain in the past as a remembered event but becomes an interpretive lens for understanding all life experiences that call into question God’s sovereignty and fidelity. For this reason, the fact that Brueggemann’s Old Testament theology begins by stating that the text of the Old Testament is

situated in the matrix of exile is significant for understanding the role of Israel's counter testimony in Brueggemann's Old Testament theology.

Scene 6: Soak our lives in it

**“Utter us through fathers and mothers close to You in awe,
You, the true subject of all our poetry. Amen”**

**(Beginning a class on Psalms, the day after the World Trade Center bombing/
September 12, 2001)**

While evaluating the contributions made by Walter Brueggemann to the field of Old Testament discipline, we can understand that the strength of Brueggemann's theology lies in his ability to move beyond scholarly critical analysis and engage the existential theological issues provoked in and through the text. The hermeneutics developed by Brueggemann opens up a possibility that the Bible is polyphonic so that all voices in its reading needs to be heard. In the Indian theological scenario, standing on the polyphonic nature of Old Testament texts as purported by Brueggemann, K. Jesurathnam in his 'Old Testament Theology: History, Issues, and Perspectives' finds the pluralistic tendencies within the Old Testament texts as an affirmation of the future of Indian biblical interpretation and also M.C Thomas' daivanubhavathinte bhahuswarangal (Malayalam title which can be translated as 'polyphony of God experiences') marks such an attempt to uncover the polyphonic expressions of Old Testament textual worlds.

Thus, reading along with the many diverse voices in the public as well as in private spaces would yield the creative, evocative and even emotive meanings from the text and our perspectives are constantly in the process of transformation for the liberative and emancipatory purposes of the communities in and around us. Brueggemann's theological sensitivity to the voiceless and oppressed, a sensitivity that runs through all of his publications, influences the theology he draws from the Old Testament. Because of this sensitivity, Brueggemann emphasizes the Psalms and the Prophets as sources for theological reflection. Thus, the production of 'the prophetic imagination' gave a new impetus to see prophesy as not future telling or fortune telling, but truth telling. The ministry Brueggemann thus rendered to the Old Testament studies will therefore sustain and inspire generations to come.

Scene 7: Easter us

“Be our God, be your true self, lord of life,

Massively turn our life toward your life

and away from our anti-neighbour and anti- self deathliness.

Hear our thankful, grateful, unashamed Hallelujah. Amen”

(After Psalm 77/ March 29, 1994)

Brueggemann has returned to his eternal home after blessed years of nurturing, nourishing and evoking a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us. A prophetic, courageous, imaginative life indeed. As he would always emphasise, “the church at prayer is the only adequate matrix for theological education, the proper way to finish is in praise and thanksgiving”. We, the faculty and students of Dharma Jyoti Vidya Peeth, Faridabad praise God for the life and ministry of Walter Brueggemann for the academic vigour and bold witness experienced through him and for affirming us that hope is never naive when it is rooted in the God of both Exodus and Easter.

Thank you Brueggemann for the faith, devotion, scholarship and witness.

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