Foreword

In August of 1997, I was actively second-guessing my decision to leave Vail, Colorado, to start the Master of Divinity program at Columbia Theological Seminary. My sister-in-law, Denise, a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA), trying to be encouraging, predicted that because I loved literature, I would surely love the Old Testament. Perhaps I was in a particularly skeptical mood, but her analogy struck me as untenable. It made as much sense as if she had said, “You love Colorado, and so surely you will love Georgia.” I couldn’t see the connection. I loved medieval tales of Arthur, Beowulf, eighteenth-century novels, Whitman’s poetry, Milton, Shakespeare, Faulkner, Camus . . . but I found church and religion dry, boring, and thin, and I assumed the Bible I had avoided since Sunday School was to blame.

Despite my misgivings, I ended up at Columbia Theological Seminary, where Walter Brueggemann quickly and forcefully disabused me of my assumptions about the Bible. Known to students for throwing himself against blackboards, shouting in defiantly un-academic ways in class, mischievously translating the Old Testament’s more vulgar expressions into the vernacular, and gleefully announcing that he was heading home to do exegesis in the same way one might proclaim, “I’m off to Hawaii!,” Walter
embodied a bracingly invigorating approach to the Bible. A bold and imaginative thinker and teacher, he inspired his students to follow him into the compelling alternative world of the Hebrew Bible. In *The Creative Word*, Brueggemann opens up this world to people who care about religious education.

**The Creative World**

Brueggemann revels in showing us what lies under every inspired rock in the Hebrew Bible, and yet in so doing, he reveals an alternative world that is both gritty and rich, often marked by extremes, limit experiences, and limit expressions. Not unlike the violent but compelling fantasy worlds created by J. R. R. Tolkien and George R. R. Martin, the biblical world Brueggemann invites us into is somehow more real and more compelling than the thin world offered up by American middle-class consumer culture, where violence is hidden and pain is papered over and everything can be fixed with a new product or a self-help book.

Most of the Christian churches I have known live in a world that is too small, too easy, and too polite. Church communities organize themselves like cable news networks: the MSNBC church, the Fox News congregation, and the Al Jazeera community. Individual congregations identify as liberal, conservative, or alternative and harbor suspicion and resentment for churches from across the aisle. Modeled as such, “church” becomes familiar, bland, and so utterly predictable that there is little room for growth or change. By insisting that the entire community appreciate the various modes exemplified in each of the three divisions of the canon, Brueggemann exposes our tendency to become settled and to silence or marginalize the voices that threaten to disrupt our narrow but secure perceptions of truth. He also offers church communities a way to imagine how they
might educate their members into a different way of being and invite them into an alternative world. The diversity in the canon becomes a model for community in the church.

Importantly, in Brueggemann’s hands, the canon is not the purveyor of authority and doctrine: it is more like a container. Within that container, the Torah provides the community with a compelling sense of identity that is not merely a mirror image of a political party or non-profit organization or university. That said, Torah does not fill the container, it merely highlights the vessel’s boundaries. The Prophets and the Writings model not just different opinions, but different modes of knowing, distinctive ways of approaching old questions and of integrating new knowings and experiences. Cut off from one another, any one canonical grouping on its own would wither. Just so, local churches wither when they encamp in one part of the canon, stagnating where they feel safe and right only to deprive themselves of the energy, passion, and newness that tends to travel on currents of disruption.

Brueggemann presses the church to barge into the canon and continue the disputes carried on there. (Many scholars would use the metaphor of conversation here, but this does not strike me as a very Brueggemann-like trope!) And yet, this kind of dispute or debate does not translate into talking over and past one another. To engage canon rightly requires that we listen as passionately as we argue because we know our truth claims are provisional. If we are more liberal, we should turn our ears to the potentially embarrassing, authoritative truth claims of Torah. If we are more conservative, we will benefit from the Writings, which feature voices like those of Job and the psalms of lament that challenge God in ways that may make us squirm. We listen to what makes us uncomfortable with the hope that our assumptions and settled claims will be disrupted. Rightly heard, the voice of the other—the other worldview, the other
epistemology, the other ideology—provokes deep self-reflection and reveals the God who is characterized by otherness. The alternative world Brueggemann shows us is created by a language of extremes: unseemly groans, embarrassing rants, loud shouts, and perhaps most discomfiting of all, changes of heart and transformations. Wishy-washiness will not be tolerated because “everything is at stake!”

The Canon as Topographical Map

Especially in more liberal churches, which are the churches I know best, educators tend to have a vague sense that it’s important for children to know the Bible. However, my impression is that many people in progressive churches harbor suspicions that the Hebrew Bible is at best irrelevant and at worst violent and oppressive. So they struggle with not only how to teach the Bible to children but why to teach it. In his chapter on Torah, Brueggemann explains not only the Bible’s significance for the next generation, but also why and how Torah, as the foundation of biblical faith, matters to the entire community. Such an approach can empower adults to teach with conviction (without flinching!) that this is our story, these are our outrageous claims, this is “where we put our buckets down,” not because it’s the best story or the objectively true one but because it is ours, and engaged deeply, it is enough to sustain us in suffering and to infuse us with newness when numbness overtakes us and the status quo exhausts us. In telling our story to our children, we practice remembering a calling to be a community set apart from the world yet engaged with it.

While Torah expresses the core of the tradition, the prophets are suspicious of official truths offered up by authorities; they can detect the desire to maintain the status quo from a mile away. When I was a teenager, I selectively recited the words of the United Church
of Christ’s statement of faith. I spoke aloud the claims I could individually consent to and remained stubbornly silent through the phrases I found galling or preposterous. A good child of a UCC pastor, I was particularly skeptical of creedal formulations, even when billed as “statements,” but this minor act of rebellion reflects the adolescent impulse to question authority and critically reflect on one’s inherited faith tradition. This perspective that is characteristic of the adolescent—and appears in more or less fully developed ways in adults—marks an important shift in canon consciousness. Through explicit engagement with the critical mode of knowledge that is dominant in the second circle of the canon (the prophets), educators can explore, nurture, and help develop a healthy skepticism toward authority and tradition. Of course, this is not material only suitable for adolescents. The entire community needs to be oriented to and formed by Torah to avoid becoming just another social group or organization and to be disrupted and unsettled by the prophets so as not to slip into rigid ways of being and thinking.

For the church, the canon can provide a sort of topographical map for the faith journey. Brueggemann works with dialectical models that sketch out the poles between which one can freely travel and explore, oriented by the terrain’s boundary markers on both sides. The smooth paths of the authoritative center are marked out for those longing for clarity and comfort in the wake of trauma. With either a pre-critical or a post-critical lens, the Torah’s ultimate claims provide calm in the storm, a base camp from which to re-fuel and re-orient. For the restless and dissatisfied, for teenagers and those being crushed beneath the weight of oppressive or repressive structures of authority, the more rugged prophetic trails are recommended. From here, there is a nice view of the center, perfect for appreciating its flaws. Finally, for those in a more reflective mood or wary of (or weary of) dogma, the Writings along the edges allow space for
discerning God’s presence in creation, for contemplating nature’s disregard for justice, for seeking and questioning God’s wisdom as it is expressed in the created (dis)order, and for engaging fellow travelers in wisdom’s preferred forms of learning: dialogue and debate designed to allow participants to puzzle over the mysteries of the universe without settling on answers or formulating doctrines.

The Creative Word, the Canon, and Biblical Scholarship

Since the publication of *The Creative Word* in 1982, scholarship on canonization has exploded. As Stephen Chapman observes, once a “rather sleepy subtopic in the field,” the history of canon formation is now at “the forefront of scholarly debate.”

A whole host of excellent scholars, using a variety of methods and aided by a range of extra-disciplinary theory, has weighed in on the development and function of the canon as a whole and of particular canonical groupings (most recently, the Book of the Twelve has garnered much attention). This work has pushed the field in a number of exciting directions; and yet, few have addressed the topic of canon from the standpoint of education for and in the mainline church, and none have done so in a way as compelling and accessible as Brueggemann has in this book.

Since the 1980s, biblical scholars have also become increasingly interested in the question of the Hebrew Bible’s role in education. In a recent study, David Carr argued that the transmission and production of the biblical texts took place in the context of education. In this way, the texts that came to comprise the canon of the Hebrew Bible played a crucial role in the formation and enculturation of Israel’s scribes. “The focus was on inscribing a culture’s most

2. See for example Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002).
precious traditions on the insides of people. Within this context, copies of texts served as solidified reference points for recitation and memorization of the tradition, demonstrations of mastery of the tradition, and gifts from the gods.” Carr’s model presupposes that the biblical texts were shaped and used by and for an elite few. However, another recent study by Seth Sanders suggests that the Hebrew Bible sought to educate and enculturate broader swathes of the community. Distinctive in the ancient Near Eastern world, the Hebrew Bible was written in the local vernacular (the language people spoke) instead of in the language of the Empire (cuneiform). In addition, a number of early texts in the Pentateuch address a plural “you” and imply that the people, rather than a leader or king, took part in key community rituals such as covenant making. As such, the Hebrew Bible addresses the people directly, inviting their participation in an alternative community. Sanders’ work “opens up the question of how the deliberate choice to create written Hebrew connects to the sense of political and theological difference, of being called to membership in a distinctive order, which pervades the Hebrew Bible.”

Since Brueggemann’s study in 1982, scholarly interest in inner-biblical exegesis and intertextuality has intensified and has further disrupted notions of the canon as characterized primarily by fixity, unity, and normativity. The traditioning process by which texts came to their final forms was remarkably fluid. Before they were finalized in the form we have, the shapes and forms of individual texts as well as larger swathes of material like books and collections

4. Ibid., 6.
were very much “under negotiation.”7 In the final product that is “the Hebrew Bible” or “the Old Testament,” early claims may stand alongside different—even contradictory—later ones, or later redactors may introduce early texts in ways that (often, not very subtly) press a particular interpretation of the earlier material. It is clear that later readers and redactors were engaged in the process of updating, contesting, contextualizing, undermining, and revising earlier texts. Although there is much debate as to which layers constitute early formulations versus late responses and redactions, there is widespread agreement among biblical scholars that the finalization of the canon essentially froze in place the final moment in a long, complex process of traditioning that was characterized by debate, dispute, and advocacy. As Brueggemann suggests here and presses further in his later work, this traditioning process of telling and retelling is best understood as a dynamic “practice of imaginative remembering” that churches, in particular educators, need to continue in order to remain vital.8

Although he advocates passionately for the church to engage in the “canonical enterprise,” Brueggemann never suggests that such a process is or was a disinterested, blithely spiritual one. And yet, somehow Brueggemann’s insistence on acknowledging the very human processes that led to the creation of the “word of God” does not undermine the Bible’s power to inspire us. When I tell my students about how this balancing act works, I refer to it as “the Brueggemann magic trick.” The ideology, self interest, political maneuvering, and human ugliness in the Bible are never explained away or minimized (in fact, they are often amplified), and yet somehow Brueggemann’s bold honesty about the humans who

produced the Bible reinforces the canon’s capacity to have authority for us, although surely standard definitions of biblical authority do not apply.

While many canonical approaches acknowledge the same tension between unity and diversity inherent in canon that Brueggemann does, many of those interested in the theological implications of the canon emphasize its unity and prioritize what they deem to be its normative message. Brueggemann, however, will have none of this. He has a unique capacity to stay in the tension. Attending to both the dynamic process of traditioning evident in the text and to the canon’s final shape, he connects the dialectic of stability and flexibility with the educational process. His model provides ways for educators and students to navigate between the poles American mainlines generally hover close to: the fossilization of the Bible on the one hand and the relativizing of the Bible on the other. To teach the Bible with passion and commitment, one need not adopt a model of submission to its authority, as traditionally conceived. To teach the Bible critically, with a clear view of the ideologies that permeate it, one need not reject its claim on people of faith. To practice faith out of that tension is to live “the Brueggemann magic trick.”

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