

An Unsettling God
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How to Teach from *An Unsettling God*

Behind *An Unsettling God* is the conviction that the Old Testament matters profoundly, as do our reading of and theological reflection on this ancient text. These matter for more than just the intellectual exercise they give us. They matter for our own lives, for the lives of others, and for the life of our world. Welcome to an urgent and challenging journey.

The Task of the Old Testament Theologian

We live in a new world in which there is no consensus about truth and reality. No revered authority—not even communities of faith, which are increasingly marginalized—can gather this consensus, except perhaps for one voice that sounds compellingly above all our voices, calling for allegiance: a voice that Brueggemann identifies with the socioeconomic, political, and military power that invades our lives in dire personal and public ways. This dismaying voice articulates who we are, how we should live our lives, and what should save us from dismay. Our new context, then, is one of wide-open pluralism that is nonetheless under forceful sway. Given this new world in which we live, in *An Unsettling God* Brueggemann raises and begins to answer important questions: about the role of Old Testament theology and theologians, about the role of communities of faith, about the role of the Old Testament itself, and indeed, about the role of Yahweh. How are we, as readers and interpreters of the Old Testament, to live in this new world of both opportunity and danger?

The theologian of the Old Testament has the task of explicating what the Old Testament has to say about God. But rather than conjuring images of a quiet afternoon at home or in the library, *An Unsettling God* is meant to help readers enter a living and lively conversation about Yahweh with all the fervor and hope, the indignation and perplexity that this conversation has ever held. Biblical theology at its best is anything but quiet, dispassionate, and benign. *An Unsettling God* shows that the Old Testament is a rich, multi-layered, many-voiced text that evades easy conclusions. We must grapple with this ambiguity and complexity.

In the past, Old Testament theology moved largely along a well-established route, asserting scholarly consensus and relying on a way of doing historical criticism that did not question its own assumptions, all within a relatively closed and elite circle of scholarship. But this route is under attack now in a culture alive with pluralism, a culture that questions any sense of unilateralism whether in theological understandings, in textual critical methodologies, or in communities of interpretation. Our new intellectual milieu insists that we rethink how we do Old

Testament theology and what we can claim from and for this theology, especially in light of new understandings of power and knowledge and their relationship to the interpretation of texts.

One feature of Brueggemann's work in Old Testament theology that draws together all these concerns—textual, intellectual, and practical—is the central metaphor of the courtroom trial. This metaphor is a powerful tool in part, perhaps, because it taps into our everyday experiences in the world as well as our occasional fascination with the trials of the rich, famous, and infamous. Certainly this metaphor has precedents in much of the literature of the ancient Middle East, including the Old Testament, so the choice of the courtroom as central metaphor is at home in the biblical text. But much more important than any popular appeal of this metaphor is the manner in which it permits Brueggemann to host the pluralism of voices in the Old Testament as well as the pluralism of voices in our current context. Dwelling with the metaphor of the courtroom enables him to insist that seeking and deciding upon truth and reality, no matter how difficult this process, is absolutely essential and life-changing.

Using *An Unsettling God* in the Classroom

As your students read the text, encourage them to watch for the following:

- the central metaphor of the courtroom trial and the manner in which Brueggemann develops this metaphor. How does it allow him creative and faithful ways of organizing and explicating Old Testament texts in order to make clear the important issues under examination and in dispute? Are there *other* metaphors in the Old Testament that are as supple and as powerful for organizing these issues?
- his respect for the Old Testament text and for its community of origin; his refusal to hide or smooth away uncomfortable, even bewildering texts; and his seeking fresh ways to explore texts that assure and comfort. In what ways does this respect allow for a more authentic encounter with the Old Testament? Are there ways in which this respect might be challenged?
- his openness to methodology that is true to the complexity of the Old Testament and to the complexity of the task of reading and interpreting, as we now understand these processes, and his awareness of the limitations of any methodology that distracts from the biblical text;
- his continual return to what doing Old Testament theology means to life in the community of faith today. Note that analysis for its own sake has no place in Brueggemann's theology. His sense of history in the making, of empire(s) lumbering, is too powerful to allow an urgent belief of his to be dispelled. That belief is that reading the Old Testament in the context of our lives just might pull us out of our homes and libraries to reengage our faith, both public and private, for hope and life. Is that hope realistic? What *is* the place of the Old Testament in the faith and life of our shared future?

You can rely also on the companion website for *An Unsettling God*, which includes:

- A study guide with a number of helpful resources. A summary of each chapter outlines the logic of that chapter and identifies key points, incorporating Brueggemann's own distinctive rhetoric.
- A series of discussion and reflection questions follows each chapter summary. These invite you to review the chapter for understanding and to move beyond Brueggemann's text in reflecting on society and your own life, faith, and community of faith. Many questions also ask you to return to the Old Testament and think through Brueggemann's insights in light of the primary text itself.
- Finally, chapter summaries and questions are often followed by Weblinks to other publications by Brueggemann. These Weblinks allow you the opportunity to explore how Brueggemann treats specific issues and topics within the larger pattern of his theology and biblical study.
- In addition to the study guide, the companion website includes a list of weblinks to online articles by and about Brueggemann, and
- a sample syllabus.