

Study Guide to *An Unsettling God*
by Walter Brueggemann

Chapter 1

YHWH as Dialogical Character

Summary

Chapter 1 explores the dialogical nature of the God of the Old Testament. Brueggemann begins with describing the two ends of the spectrum of interpretations of the word “God” in this context: At one end is God as a generic force for good, a concept with roots in Gnosticism and a presence in New Age spirituality; at the other is God as “Unmoved Mover,” a concept from ancient Hellenistic thought as well as classical scholasticism. Brueggemann argues that these views are not supported by the characterizing of YHWH in the Bible—that God is in fact “a fully articulated personal agent.” This is the starting point for understanding God in relation.

After exploring the common theological paradigm first developed in Near Eastern religion, Brueggemann goes on to show how the Old Testament moves beyond this tradition in portraying God in relation, as well as human beings having agency within their covenant with YHWH. Israel in fact has a “thick” relationship with YHWH, one characterized by dialogic exchange and a lack of finality.

The chapter goes on to discuss the significant contributions of Jewish theologians Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Emmanuel Levinas to a dialogical interpretation of the God of the Old Testament. From there Brueggemann explores the pathos of God—that is, the capacity of God to suffer and the implications of that trait.

Finally, the chapter looks at the biblical texts that describe the nature of the dialogue between YHWH and Israel, in particular the elements of lament and praise. Brueggemann points to the crucial theme that arises from these texts: “This dialogue with YHWH is attestation to the crisis of fidelity that is the recurring subject of faith.”

Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. Brueggemann argues for a view of God as “active agent.” How does this portrayal lead to embarrassment for moderns? What does he say is the result of such embarrassment, and why is it a problem in terms of the biblical tradition?
2. What are the main features of the “common paradigm” of ancient Near Eastern religion, according to Morton Smith? In what key ways does Old Testament theology move beyond this paradigm?

3. Brueggemann writes that the biblical covenant with YHWH makes it impossible for “God to be settled, static, or fixed.” For more of his thoughts on covenant, read Jerry L. Van Marter, “Neither Absolutist Nor Atheist Be: Brueggemann Says God’s Covenant More Complex Than Most Believe,” Presbyterian News Service, November 7, 2008 (<http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/2008/08830.htm>). This article summarizes a speech Brueggemann gave to a gathering of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians. What, according to Brueggemann, are the hallmarks of an absolutist? How does autonomy relate to atheism? What are the implications of his view of God’s covenant for building inclusive church communities?
4. Explain this statement: “Israel’s sense of YHWH is definingly thick.” What does it mean to be in “thick relationship”?
5. Brueggemann discusses the significance of Martin Buber’s view of the God-human relationship in his seminal work *I and Thou*. He admits that Buber “will insist that YHWH is always ‘Thou’” but claims that in his own view “on occasion YHWH might be the ‘I’ authorized by Israel’s ‘Thou’” and that this view isn’t incompatible with Buber’s. What would be the implications of viewing the God-human relationship as limited to one role for each (God only as “Thou”)? What might it mean theologically to believe that the human person could at times be “Thou”?
6. According to Brueggemann’s reading of Rosenzweig, in the dialogue of faith, while God is preeminent, “the answering partner has a decisive role to play.” How do the texts cited on pages 7–8 support this reading? What other aspects or character traits of the two dialogue partners come to the fore in these texts?
7. Briefly explain Moltmann’s reading of Heschel’s view of the pathos of God, especially as it relates to the concept of a dipolar theology. How does Moltmann relate Heschel’s Jewish view of God’s pathos to a Christian Trinitarian view? Do you agree with Brueggemann that “Moltmann’s statement is completely congruent . . . with what Heschel had already discerned in Israel’s prophets”? Explain your position.
8. Give examples of lament and of praise from the Psalms or other Old Testament texts, and explain what they demonstrate about Israel’s relationship to YHWH and the nature of dialogic faith and how they contribute to the concept of agency on the part of both Israel and God.
9. Brueggemann writes, “This dialogic faith does not aspire to settlements and final formulations, though it may come to some of those (that remain provisional) through the transaction. What counts is the *performance*.” Explain the role of “performance” in dialogic faith, with reference to the portrayals of Israel and YHWH in the Old Testament text.

10. Brueggemann quotes Moltmann as stating that humans do “not enter into a mystical union but into a sympathetic union with God.” What is the distinction that Moltmann is making here between mysticism and sympathy? What are the potential ramifications for mystical spirituality if God is seen as a dialogic partner with humans?

For Further Exploration

Read related articles by Walter Brueggemann:

“Covenant as a Subversive Paradigm.” *Christian Century*, November 12, 1980, 1094–99,
<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1727>.

“Dialogue Between Incommensurate Partners: Prospects for Common Testimony.” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 38/4 (Fall 2001): 383–98,
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3236/is_4_38/ai_n28891965/.

Chapter 2

Israel as Yahweh's Partner

Summary

In this chapter, Brueggemann examines Israel's unsolicited testimony regarding one of Yahweh's partners, Israel itself, "the special object of Yahweh's most characteristic verbs ...". Brueggemann organizes the chapter with five aspects or themes that "form one coherent construal of Israel's unsolicited testimony about its life as Yahweh's primary partner ..."; that outline "Israel's normative, historical-canonical recital"; and that describe how Yahweh and Israel characteristically are in relationship with one another.

The first theme is "Yahweh's Original Love for Israel," a love witnessed to in the ancestral stories of Genesis and the Exodus-Sinai narrative. Brueggemann identifies characteristic verbs that describe Yahweh's peculiar act of caring for and choosing a people from among all peoples for special commitment. This "initiatory act of love, rescue, and designation is made by a sovereign who in this act of love does not cease to be sovereign." And so the second theme concerns Israel as the covenant partner of Yahweh, obligated to obey Yahweh. Two traditions regarding Israel's obligations to Yahweh are explored: hearing and seeing. In the hearing tradition, Israel understands itself to be a community that hears Yahweh's commands to do justice so that all in the community, especially the most vulnerable, are sustained. While some commands point in directions that are not revolutionary in this concern for the marginalized, Brueggemann contends that "*what is most characteristic and most distinctive in the life and vocation of this partner of Yahweh ... is the remarkable equation of love of God with love of neighbor.*" The priestly seeing tradition holds that "the purpose of life is communion with Yahweh, a genuine, real, and palpable presence." The overwhelming nature of Yahweh's majesty and beauty are communicated in the extravagance of tabernacle and temple, which alerts Israel to the extraordinary realm that it enters in seeking God's presence. Israel's holiness opens the door to this presence. But Israel's obedience and holiness extend beyond its own borders, for Israel understands itself to have a mysterious, God-given role with regards to other nations of the world.

The third theme concerns Israel as Yahweh's "*recalcitrant partner,*" sent into exile. This theme emerges in Joshua through Kings as well as in the prophets, who charge Israel with disobedience. The destruction and scattering of Israel—Israel's rejection by Yahweh—follow. Despite this "theological datum concerning Israel's life with Yahweh," Israel does not abandon its faith. Brueggemann describes five new practices: (1) Israel learns to practice its faith in exile; (2) Israel repents; (3) Israel practices profound grief and protest to God about its exile; (4) Israel expresses God's presence despite signs of God's absence; and (5) Israel practices hope, refusing to accept exile as a deadend to its future or to its relationship with Yahweh. Israel's new practices perhaps convince Yahweh of a course of action that "... Yahweh had not yet entertained or imagined or intended." Yahweh turns to Israel in a new way—the fourth theme and another "equally certain theological datum" of Israel. And with this turn, Israel once again

becomes Yahweh's full partner. The fifth theme involves the regathering of a forgiven Israel to a life freed of past failure. Brueggemann writes that the Jewish community that emerges from this regathering has two accents that, while in tension, are held together: joyful, assuring, and vigorous obedience in the here and now as well as hope for the future, variously expressed (e.g., messianic, apocalyptic) but founded in Yahweh alone, the God who both commands and saves. All in all, Israel asserts that "its entire life is in relation to Yahweh."

Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. Brueggemann maps out five aspects or themes of Israel's life with Yahweh. What are each of these five aspects? What verbs are associated with each? Why are these aspects significant to our theological understanding of God and Israel?
2. According to Brueggemann, how does Israel understand its chosenness? Chosen for what?
3. In identifying the hearing and seeing traditions of Israel's obedience to Yahweh, Brueggemann writes that "the commands of justice and seeing the 'face' of Yahweh live in profound tension with each other." How are these commands in tension with one another? Give examples. How does Brueggemann bring these "two traditions of obedience" into relationship with one another? Do you think it is important that individuals and communities of faith live out both traditions? Why or why not?
4. Read Deuteronomy 22–26. Identify commands that protect the status quo. Identify commands that protect the vulnerable. (Historical critical resources may be helpful in identifying what is customary and what is revolutionary for ancient Israel in these chapters.) What does doing justice in the community have to do with the Exodus, according to Deuteronomy?
5. Brueggemann calls the usual distinction between conditional and unconditional covenants misleading, for a covenant is "utterly giving and utterly demanding," and a covenant incorporates both law and grace. Explain what he means. Can the covenant of marriage serve as an analogue, exemplifying the utterly giving and demanding aspects of covenant? Can you think of other analogues?
6. Brueggemann writes that what Christians most need to resist in reading the Old Testament and in understanding emerging Judaism "is the conventional Christian stereotype of legalism." In other words, Christians tend to speak in terms of "'Christian grace' " and 'Jewish law.'" Why does Brueggemann think this stereotype is wrong? How is it a misunderstanding of the Old Testament?
7. What is Israel's response to exile, according to Brueggemann?

8. What are the various reasons Israel proposes for its exile? What are the various reasons proposed for Yahweh's turnaround?
9. Why does Brueggemann offer four renditions of the testimony of Israel regarding its life with Yahweh? What is distinctive about these renditions? What is similar about them?
10. Brueggemann draws parallels between the Judaism that emerged with Israel's regathering and the Christianity that emerged shaped, in part, by Paul's writings. What two accents mark each? Do these accents continue to mark Judaism and Christianity today? If so, in what ways?

For Further Exploration

Read related articles by Walter Brueggemann:

"The City in Biblical Perspective: Failed and Possible." *Word & World* 19/3 (Summer 1999): 236–50, http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/19-3_Politics/19-3_Brueggemann.pdf.

"The Gospel vs. Scripture? Biblical Theology and the Debate about Rites of Blessing: An Interview with Walter Brueggemann." By Julie A. Wortman. *The Witness* 85/10 (November 2002), <http://thewitness.org/archive/nov2002/brueggemann.html>.

"Hope in the Face of Loss." *The Other Side* 35/2 (March-April 1999): 17–20, 49, <http://www.theotherside.org/archive/mar-apr99/brueggemann.html>.

"A Journey: Attending to the Abyss." *The Bible in TransMission*, Spring 2000, 6–8, <http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/13.php?id=304>.

"Passion and Perspective: Two Dimensions of Education in the Bible." *Theology Today* 42/2 (July 1985): 172–80, <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/search/index-browse.htm>.

"Rethinking Church Models through Scripture." *Theology Today* 48/2 (July 1991): 128–38, <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/search/index-browse.htm>.

"A Story of Loss and Hope." *Sojourners* 27/6 (November-December 1998): 44–48, under "Living the Word," <http://www.sojo.net>. Go to "Magazine" and double-click on "Browse Archives."

Chapter 3

The Human Person as Yahweh's Partner

Summary

Chapter 3 focuses on a second of Yahweh's partners—the human person—who, Brueggemann states, is not defined in terms of “*an autonomous or universal notion of humanness*” but as “Yahwistic humanness or, we may say, Jewish humanness.” At the outset, Brueggemann sets aside two doctrinal issues that have been particularly compelling to biblical interpretation and theology around the topic of humanness: the concept of the “image of God” and of human physiology. The notion of the image of God and ancient understandings of human physiology, Brueggemann explains, do not play a key role in the Old Testament understanding of humanness. Rather, Israel defines the human person as one who is “*in relation to Yahweh*, who lives in an intense mutuality with Yahweh.” In other words, Israel defines humanness in terms of its own self-understanding: to be human is to be a covenant partner of Yahweh.

Brueggemann develops what this definition means by looking at “three aspects of humanness that are matchups to three central claims made for Yahweh.” Yahweh's sovereignty and human obedience form the first matchup. Israel understands all humankind to be in covenant with Yahweh (Gen 9:8–17) all called to obey this Sovereign. “There can be no pre-commandment or non-commandment human person.” Yahweh's deep fidelity and human freedom form the second matchup. The human person may step into the open space created by Yahweh's commitment to and rich pathos for humankind and insist on Yahweh's reliable care. The third matchup involves the tension in the relationship between Yahweh and the human person. As Brueggemann puts it, the human “is invited, expected, and insistently urged to engage in a genuine interaction that is variously self-asserting and self-abandoning, yielding and initiative-taking.” The result is “*the dialectic of assertion and abandonment in the human person [as] a counterpart to the unsettled interiority of Yahweh's sovereignty and fidelity.*”

With these broad brushstrokes in place, Brueggemann continues with the specific markings that characterize the human person, identifying three groupings of disciplines that characterize “covenantal humanness vis-à-vis Yahweh.” In the first grouping, Israel holds that “humanness means to *hear and obey* the elemental, world-defining, world-sustaining, world-ordering will of Yahweh for justice and holiness” (emphasis added). Humanness also means to *discern* the wisdom of God, mysteriously ordering creation, and to practice this wisdom for the well-being of all creation. It also means to *trust* Yahweh, abiding in confidence and not in fear, for Yahweh will secure and bless life. In the second grouping of disciplines, practiced within the context of risk and danger, the human person, utterly reliant on Yahweh's fidelity, carries out “a vigorous act of freedom and responsibility” in insisting on Yahweh's attention and care through *complaint*. In *petitioning*, this person also issues imperatives as well as motivations to Yahweh, hoping to mobilize “the undoubted power of Yahweh.” The human person who offers *thanksgiving* acknowledges the return of well-being and Yahweh's action in this restoration. The third grouping of practices brings the “drama of rehabilitation” to a close. The human person

moves from thanksgiving for specific gifts of God to a general and often hyperbolic *praise* of Yahweh as the author of all well-being. Brueggemann calls this “a glad act of self-abandonment,” relinquishing all of one’s self and desires to Yahweh. The last discipline of the human person is *hope*, an act of profound confidence in Yahweh finally to make all things right in this world. Brueggemann summarizes the four dimensions of hope as “full knowledge of Yahweh, full communion with Yahweh, ... full enjoyment of an abundant earth ... [and] full confidence in Yahweh at death.”

Brueggemann holds out Israel’s understanding of the human person as an alternative of relatedness and hope in stark contrast with models of humanness that characterize “our self-destructive culture.”

Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. Brueggemann refers to a number of theological concepts, some of which have played a major role in Christian theology and have drawn on Old Testament texts for support.

- a. Brueggemann writes that “*the notion of humanity in ‘the image of God’ plays no primary role in Old Testament articulations of humanity*; it does not constitute a major theological datum for Israel’s reflection on the topic.” Why has this doctrine become so important to Christians reading the Old Testament, according to Brueggemann? What Old Testament understanding of humanness replaces this Christian concept? Does this understanding provide you resources in reflecting on your life and the lives of others around you?
- b. What was significant to Israel about ancient human physiology, as Israel understood it? Why has this physiology become important to Christian interpretation?
- c. Many theological discussions of humanness have emphasized the doctrine of original sin, or the fall of humankind. Brueggemann refers to this doctrine in discussing Psalm 103: “The speaker does not wallow in a guilty conscience and does not appeal to anything like original sin.” How does Brueggemann explain sin in terms of the Old Testament?
- d. Brueggemann points out two Old Testament texts that clearly refer to resurrection. He comments: “Too much should not be made of these two tests, nor should too much be made of the absence of more texts like them.” Why not?
- e. Who is Satan in the book of Job? Why does Brueggemann comment that the character of Satan suggests “that the issues of human life are both more inscrutable and more ominous than simple moralism, either covenantal or sapiential, will allow”?

2. Explain in your own words the three “matchups” that Brueggemann presents between Israel’s claims about Yahweh and Yahweh’s partner, the human person. Explain the three groupings of disciplines that characterize Yahweh’s partner. What in these matchups and disciplines do you find interesting and/or challenging to your faith?

3. Read Job 31. This chapter provides specific examples of what Israel considers covenantal obligations of humans who live in right relationship with their neighbors. What are these obligations? Does Job 31 bear out Brueggemann's assertion that the practice of justice involves "mobilizing social power, especially the power and resources of the strong for the well-being of the whole community"? Why or why not?

4. Brueggemann writes that Israel's unsolicited testimony "does not envision human persons who are arrogantly autonomous, [nor does it] envision human beings who are endlessly and fearfully deferential to Yahweh." Describe the relationship of Yahweh and Yahweh's partner, the human person, as Brueggemann understands it. What deep tension characterizes this relationship?

5. Commenting on the Christian church, Brueggemann writes: "the loss of [Israel's] standard practice of complaint and petition from theological perspectives, which has entailed the loss of self-assertion over against Yahweh and the forfeiture of countertestimony about Yahweh, is precisely what has produced 'false selves,' both in an excessively pietistic church that champions deference and in an excessively moralistic, brutalizing society that prizes conformity and the stifling of rage." Read footnote.

a. What does Brueggemann mean by the "initial sense of omnipotence" in the human who urgently, insistently prays to Yahweh? Does loss of self-assertion and countertestimony lead to "false selves" in the church? Why or why not?

b. How would you characterize the prayers of your community of faith? Do they take the initiative with Yahweh, calling Yahweh to account, insisting on well-being, "even with shrillness ..."? Are self-assertion and countertestimony regarding Yahweh permitted, encouraged, in your community of faith? Should they be? Why or why not? Do you agree that the church encourages "false selves" and conformity in its practices and beliefs? Do you agree that our society encourages "false selves" and conformity in each of us?

c. Write or create orally a prayer about a need that you deeply experience, and include shrill complaint and petition as well as thanksgiving and praise. Are you comfortable praying this prayer? Why or why not?

d. Read some of Brueggemann's prayers in *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) or *Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). What do you think of these prayers? What do you think God thinks of them?

6. Brueggemann contends that Israel's testimony about the human person offers resources to us that contrast with "the predominant temptations of our self-destructive culture." He writes that his concern is not for theory but "actual human practices in a commodity-driven society that is fundamentally alienated through an ideology of consumer individualism," also termed

“*commodity militarism*.” Review the resources outlined on p. 91. Do you agree with this outline? How would you revise it? How could the practices outlined on p. 91 be lived out in specific circumstances? Provide examples from your own life and the lives of people you know.

7. Summarize the four dimensions of hope for the human person, according to Israel’s testimony.

For Further Exploration

Read Related Articles by Walter Brueggemann:

“Comments on *The Prayer of Jabez*.” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, no. 509 (November 2, 2001), <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week509/wbrueggemann.html>. (For a conversation with the author of *The Prayer of Jabez*, Bruce Wilkinson, see <http://www.thirteen.org/religionandethics/week509/feature.html>.)

“The Embarrassing Footnote.” *Theology Today* 44/1 (April 1987): 5–14, <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/search/index-browse.htm>.

“Hope in the Face of Loss.” *The Other Side* 35/2 (March-April 1999): 17–20, 49, <http://www.theotherside.org/archive/mar-apr99/brueggemann.html>.

Chapter 4

The Nations as Yahweh's Partner

Summary

This chapter examines Israel's testimony concerning a third of Yahweh's partners—the nations. While it remains "Yahweh's preferred and privileged partner" in its testimony, Israel also speaks of "the larger scope of Yahweh's freedom and passion." Brueggemann identifies a tension in the way Israel articulates the nations' relationship to Yahweh: as Israel sees it, this relationship is "mediated through Israel" but also "stands independent of Israel." Foundational to all testimony, however, is Yahweh's sweeping claim of sovereignty over all nations and peoples, recipients of the Noachic covenant, who, according to the ancestral narrative, rejected Yahweh's rule and were scattered. Brueggemann takes up the future of the nations and Yahweh's relationship with them in this chapter.

Brueggemann looks first at "*testimony that is Israel-driven*, testimony that interprets everything as though its primary point of concern is Israel." He finds a wide range of testimony. The theme of Yahweh's sovereignty over all nations but enacted through Davidic/Jerusalem rule typifies the royal psalms, which "[resist] the notion that the nations are in fact a full partner of Yahweh." The Mosaic-covenant traditions claim Yahweh's (and therefore Israel's) violence on behalf of land and blessing for Israel alone, another diminution of the nations as God's partner. On the other hand, the ancestral stories speak of Israel's call to bless, rather than eliminate, the nations. And in still other texts, Israel summons the nations to praise Yahweh and imagines the day when the nations will gladly come to Jerusalem and learn the laws of Yahweh, which belong to all nations.

Brueggemann looks next at testimony by Israel that evidences some awareness that "the relation of the nations of Yahweh is, on occasion, direct and not dependent on or derivative from Israel's status and condition." This testimony comprises "the oracles against the nations," which assume that Yahweh's sovereignty overrides any other claim to authority—especially authority that brutalizes humans and resists the mandates of Yahweh. Brueggemann looks specifically at the oracles concerning the superpowers that impinge negatively on the life of Israel: Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. Each of these three empires violates the mandates of Yahweh and faces Yahweh's punishment, although the future of all three is not always imagined, in Israel's testimony, as absolute destruction. Unlike the other three superpowers, Persia is Israel's rescuer, the "exemplar of a positive, responsive partner" of Yahweh. Israel testifies in remarkable ways to this foreign power as Yahweh's chosen agent and its ruler Cyrus as Yahweh's messiah. Summarizing the oracles, Brueggemann points to "the sequence of ways" that Yahweh relates to the nations, a sequence that also typifies Yahweh's relationship with Israel and human persons: (1) Yahweh commands, (2) the nations are tempted to claim autonomous power, (3) the life of the nations is broken, but (4) future recovery is a living hope.

Following this summary, Brueggemann explicates two radical examples of Israel's testimony that show Israel "mov[ing] beyond itself and its self-serving ideology, to reposition

itself in the family of beloved nations, and to reimagine Yahweh, beyond any self-serving, privileged claim, into the largest possible horizon, as the one who intends well-being for all the nations, including the ones formerly defiant and condemned.”

Brueggemann brings his chapter to a close, returning to earlier remarks about the broader scope of Yahweh’s freedom and passion. He concludes that Yahweh is free and able “to recruit nations for Yahweh’s own purposes” and to “terminate nations, even great superpowers.” Yahweh’s passion for the nations, however, is less clear, but can be inferred, Brueggemann holds, from texts that speak of Yahweh’s enactment of Israel’s transformative verbs on behalf of the nations. Finally, Brueggemann explains his unorthodox inclusion of the nations as a topic in his theology as a corrective to the impression that the Old Testament is only interested in Israel and to the privatization of faith in Western Christianity.

Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. Explain the tension that Brueggemann points out in testimony by Israel that speaks of the nations’ relationship to Yahweh as “mediated through Israel” versus as “independent of Israel.” Why is there tension? Give an example of each testimony, and explain the similarities and differences between these two examples.
2. What is the range of Israel’s testimony about its role among the nations? Give examples of various biblical texts that speak of different roles for Israel.
3. When Brueggemann discusses Psalm 96, he writes: “... the Yahwistic claim, surely theological in intent, is never completely free of socioeconomic-political-military interest. Israel, as a witness, is not above giving testimony that serves its own interest and reputation.”
 - a. Read Psalm 96. What in this psalm serves Israel’s self-interest? How is this self-interest woven into the theology of this psalm? What role does ideology play in *our* theology (the theology of our communities of faith, our leaders, our families, our own selves)? Give examples.
 - b. Brueggemann comments that the ideology in Psalm 96 does not necessarily “dispose of nor delegitimize the theological claim that is here made.” At what point is ideology destructive to theology? At what point does ideology delegitimize theology? What norms can help us discern when theology is undermined by ideology? Can you think of historical examples where this delegitimation has occurred?
4. What are the “oracles against the nations”? Define and describe this genre specifically. In what literary tradition of the Old Testament is this genre typically found?
5. In the oracles against Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, what are the major themes? How are these oracles similar to and different from one another? Read Isa 44:24–28 and Isa 45:1–7. How are

these oracles concerning Persia different from the oracles of the other three superpowers? According to Brueggemann, what is remarkable about the oracles concerning Persia?

6. Look at the chart on p. 519. Notice the titles across the top of the chart: *Mandate*, *Autonomous Rebellion*, *Dismantling*, and *Rehabilitation*. Brueggemann writes that this sequence of actions concerns not only the nations but also Israel and human persons. Using this sequence, sketch out a chart for Israel as well as the human person, based on Brueggemann's examination of these partners in chapters 14 and 15.

7. Read Amos 9:7 and Isa 19:23–25. What surprises does Brueggemann find in these texts, individually and together?

8. Brueggemann explains that one reason he has included the nations in his discussion of Yahweh's partners is that "[o]ver the long haul of the Enlightenment, Western Christianity has been progressively privatized in terms of individuals, families, and domestic communities. By and large, out of bewilderment and embarrassment, the ecclesial communities have forgotten how to speak about national and international matters, except in times of war to mobilize God 'for the war effort.'"

a. What does Brueggemann mean by privatization "in terms of individuals, families, and domestic communities"? What does the Enlightenment have to do with this privatization? How do we think and live differently from people unaffected by or previous to the Enlightenment?

b. In what ways are ecclesial communities bewildered and/or embarrassed? How often does your community of faith incorporate study of national and international matters into its life (beyond discussion of God and the 'war effort')? How often do you hear sermons on these matters?

c. Explore some of Brueggemann's sermons that involve national and international matters. Read "Always Again Before Nebuchadnezzar," "Taking a Second Painful Look," and/or "The Midnight of Power and Weakness" in *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness* by Walter Brueggemann (ed. Charles L. Campbell [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996]). Or read "Misreading the Data," "The Big Yes," and/or "Bragging about the Right Stuff" in *Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann* (ed. Anna Carter Florence [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004]). How does Brueggemann bring the Bible to bear on current public concerns, both national and international? Does he tell congregations what to think about these concerns? Do you agree or disagree with Brueggemann that ecclesial communities should speak about national and international matters, not just private and personal concerns? Why? What guidelines would help communities begin these conversations and reflections?

9. Brueggemann writes that he expects most readers of his “Old Testament theology will be citizens of ‘the last superpower,’ ” the United States: “I intend that my analysis of Yahweh and the nations should finally settle in the presence of the United States, which has no viable competitor for power, and which is in an economic, military position to imagine, like Egypt, that it produces its own Nile.” Brueggemann then points to hope—“a residue of moral awareness in the ethos of the United States”—while he also points to danger: “economic ideology and military self-justification tend easily and eagerly to override that residue of awareness.” In what ways is the U.S. like and unlike the Egypt, Assyria and Babylon of the oracles? Is the current “liberal autonomy” of which Brueggemann writes analogous to the “self-deceiving self-sufficiency” of the ancient superpowers Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon? Are these oracles “outmoded or self-deceived rhetoric?” Does Israel’s testimony regarding the nations as Yahweh’s partner put the United States, “like every superpower before it, on notice?” Do current world powers have anything to learn from Persia’s policies and actions, as Israel presents and analyzes them?

For Further Exploration

Read an article by Walter Brueggemann that looks at Israel’s response to each of the empires discussed in this chapter:

“Ecumenism as the Shared Practice of a Peculiar Identity.” *Word & World* 18/2 (Spring 1998): 122–35, http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/18-2_Ecumenism/18-2_Brueggemann.pdf.

Chapter 5

Creation as Yahweh's Partner

Summary

This chapter treats a fourth of Yahweh's partners and "the most expansive horizon of Israel's testimony concerning the transactional quality of Yahweh's life": creation, or "the whole, known, visible world." Brueggemann adds: "As with the other partners, creation as Yahweh's partner is read through Israel's sense of self." "Three seasons" mark creation's life with Yahweh.

The first season concerns creation, blessed by Yahweh, capable of producing life, capable of sustaining life on behalf of all. This world, Brueggemann writes, is not created *ex nihilo*. Rather, Yahweh has imposed order upon what already exists: chaotic material and destructive, defiant forces. Three themes influence this understanding of an abundant creation. First, the practice of wisdom is necessary to the flourishing of creation. Without "the careful, constant, reflective attention to the shapes and interconnections that keep the world generative," without life lived "in resonance with" the wisdom with which Yahweh has suffused creation, trouble and chaos erupt. Second, creation's continuance involves an ethical dimension: the practice of righteousness, which calls for the generosity of creation to extend to all, not just some. Third, if scholarly consensus is correct concerning creation faith as one of the results of Israel's experience in exile, then creation becomes "a treasured counter to the disordered experience of chaos in exile." Indeed, it seems to have been enacted in Israel's worship "as a concrete life-or-death discipline and practice, whereby the peculiar claims of Yahweh were mediated in and to Israel."

The second season of creation's life with Yahweh involves an endangered creation. Israel identifies "*an enduring force of chaos in its life*" that it cannot control. Brueggemann points to two Old Testament ways of understanding this force. The first is dualistic. Israel describes a counterforce to God that was not eliminated in creation but only defeated. This force rises again and again to oppose Yahweh. Brueggemann summarizes the work of two scholars who point out (1) the mythic quality of this force that does not permit easy defeat by Yahweh and that has vast ramifications for creation and (2) the personal scope of this force, articulated not as sin or guilt but as a deathly power that can inflict personal suffering (like AIDS) wherever Yahweh is not vigilant. Yahweh's constant attention is necessary to guarantee blessing and life. In the second understanding of this force of chaos, Yahweh has conquered and now deploys this force against those that reject Yahweh's sovereignty. Brueggemann argues that this second understanding is probably dominant in the Old Testament. He adds that two matters, one in each understanding, qualify Yahweh's sovereign freedom: (1) the continuing existence of a force that defies Yahweh and (2) covenant sanctions that trigger Yahweh's destructiveness.

The third season of creation's relationship with Yahweh brings hope to creation in devastation. Brueggemann writes that no Old Testament passage speaks of Yahweh's deep love for creation but that Israel nonetheless testifies to various experiences in which Yahweh interrupts and even reverses creation's destruction. Brueggemann looks at texts in which

Yahweh takes action to terminate creation (e.g., the flood narrative) but does an about-face. He also looks at texts in which Yahweh chooses to create new life and possibility in the midst of devastation as well as a text in which Israel imagines a new world where all creation is put right and is at peace.

The three seasons of creation—“*season of blessing*,” “*radical fissure*,” and “*radical newness*”—testify to a God who does not wish to settle for destruction but who has resolved “to overcome all forsakenness and abandonment known in Israel and in the world.”

Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. What are the three seasons of creation’s life with Yahweh, according to Brueggemann? Look at the chart on p. 127. Note the titles across the top of the chart: *Mandate*, *Autonomous Rebellion*, *Dismantling*, and *Rehabilitation*. In chapter 16, Brueggemann writes that this sequence of actions concerns not only the nations but also Israel and human persons. Assuming that this sequence may also apply to creation, fill out a chart for creation as Yahweh’s partner, based on Brueggemann’s argument in this chapter. How will you fill out the first two categories, *Mandate* and *Autonomous Rebellion*? Who is responsible for the “mandate” involving creation? What rebellion results in the dismantling of creation?
2. In writing of the themes of a blessed creation, Brueggemann points out two practices that ensure the world’s prospering: the practice of wisdom and the practice of righteousness. What is the difference between wisdom and righteousness? In what traditions within Israel’s testimony are these concepts/practices found? Give examples of wisdom texts as well as “righteousness texts” that link the quality of one’s life to creation’s well-being.
3. Read Gen 1:1–2:4a and Exod 25–31; 39:32 and 40:33. Brueggemann writes that scholars have identified within the Exodus texts “an odd and seemingly intentional parallel to the creation liturgy of Gen 1:1–2:4a (533). What parallels do you find between these texts?
4. Brueggemann comments that for Israel-in-exile creation theology and “enactment” in worship have “concrete and immediate pastoral implication.” How might this theology and enactment be helpful to a community/nation in exile? Can you think of contemporary situations where this theology and practice might have similar implications?
5. According to Brueggemann, what are the two ways that Israel testifies to the presence of destructive and chaotic forces in the world? Read Psalm 74, Isa 51:9–16, Deut 32:39–43, and Isa 45:1–7. Which of the two ways does each of these texts support? What do you think of these two explanations of the presence of destructiveness in the world? Do you prefer one explanation to another? Why or why not? Think of some of the popular movie series that have held the American public’s attention in the last decades (e.g., *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry*

Potter). What explanation of destruction's presence do these films pose? Why do you think this explanation is so powerful in our popular imagination?

6. Brueggemann suggests that the dualistic understanding of destruction's presence in the world may offer people of faith some help in thinking through the profound horrors and deep personal suffering of our world. What issues in particular does he have in mind? How does "dualism-in-creation" inform reflection on these examples of suffering, according to Brueggemann and others? To what extent do you agree that this understanding provides "important theological-pastoral resources"?

7. Why does Yahweh not fully terminate creation, according to Israel's testimony? What various answers are given?

For Further Exploration

Read Related Articles by Walter Brueggemann:

"Enough is Enough." *The Other Side* 37, no. 6 (November-December 2001): 10–13, <http://www.theotherside.org/archive/nov-dec01/brueggemann.html>.

"Environment as Creation: Conquest vs. Care for the Wilderness." Review of *Yearning for the Land: A Search for the Importance of Place*, by John Warfield Simpson; *God's Wilds: John Muir's Vision of Nature*, by Dennis C. Williams; *Worship and Wilderness: Culture, Religion, and Law in Public Lands Management*, by Lloyd Burton. *Books & Culture* 10, no. 1 (January-February 2004): 42, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2004/001/17.42.html>.

"The Loss and Recovery of Creation in Old Testament Theology." *Theology Today* 53, no. 2 (July 1996): 177–90, <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/search/index-browse.htm>.

Chapter 6

The Drama of Partnership with Yahweh

Summary

Brueggemann lays out his program for chapter 6 thus: “As a concluding statement on these four partners of Yahweh [Israel, the human person, the nations, and creation], I will first consider a recurring pattern in the four partners, then a reflection on Yahweh as given us in this unsolicited testimony, and finally a reflection on the significance of this witness amid the dominant ideologies of our interpretive venue.”

In identifying a “recurring pattern” among the four partners of Yahweh, and in keeping with his attention to the narrative, Brueggemann suggests “*a dramatic movement*” of three parts: “creation for glad obedience,” “a failed relationship,” and “rehabilitation for a new beginning.” This “rough perspective,” he writes, requires adjustment for each partner. For example, Israel, “a people chosen and formed” by Yahweh for obedience, is “scattered into exile.” The human person is also created for obedience but experiences the Pit. And the nations are called to be “Yahweh’s vassals and instruments in the geopolitical process” but experience destruction in resisting Yahweh’s sovereignty. Creation, on the other hand, “formed in generosity,” returns to chaos “when human agents, charged with the well-being of creation, renege on their caretaking responsibility.” All partners must rely on Yahweh for new life, experienced differently by each partner.

Brueggemann then returns to what this unsolicited testimony concerning Yahweh’s partners tells us about Yahweh, the purpose for looking at this testimony in the first place. Yahweh is a God of “self-giving engagement,” who employs sovereign power not just to celebrate Yahweh’s own self but to give life to Yahweh’s partners. At the same time, because of great self-regard, Yahweh will not accept the autonomy of partners but destroys the recalcitrant. This circumstance of destruction for the partners does not isolate partners from Yahweh, however. They may appeal to Yahweh’s “soft underside ... in tension with Yahweh’s self-regard.” Indeed, to mobilize Yahweh in this circumstance “characteristically requires an act of initiative on the part of the abandoned partner,” an act that can even effect change in Yahweh, who, the abandoned discover, is “willing and able to enact a radical newness for each of Yahweh’s partners.”

Brueggemann calls “[t]his drama of brokenness and restoration” a metanarrative, “a more-or-less coherent perspective on reality” that contrasts with two other construals of reality in our society. Israel’s metanarrative, he writes, stands, first, against the primary metanarrative of our society, rooted in the Enlightenment and “featur[ing] *scarcity*, *denial*, and *despair*, surely the ingredients of nihilism.” Israel testifies to a world created for “*limitless generosity*,” not for scarcity and anxiety. Against the practice of denial, Israel openly declares that brokenness marks life and that candid, passionate protest to Yahweh makes new life possible. Against a despairing gospel of human self-sufficiency, Israel testifies to “Yahweh’s intentions [that] have not and will not be defeated.” Second, Brueggemann contrasts Israel’s metanarrative to that of classical Christianity. Granting “the enormous difference” made by the church’s claims for Jesus Christ,

Brueggemann points out another stark contrast: Israel's testimony to a God who is "genuinely dialectical," always in negotiation with God's partners, and open to the impact of this transaction. Christianity, Brueggemann comments, "is tilted in a transcendental direction, which gives closure to Yahweh and to Yahweh's relationships with the partners."

Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. What is the recurring pattern that Brueggemann identifies in Israel's unsolicited testimony concerning Yahweh's partners? How does Brueggemann adjust this pattern for each of the four partners? How are these partners similar to and different from one another with regards to this pattern?
2. What do we learn about Yahweh, according to Brueggemann, from this unsolicited testimony? How does this testimony add to what we have already learned?
3. Brueggemann writes that the threefold pattern that he identifies in Israel's unsolicited testimony regarding Yahweh's partners seems similar "to the creation-sin-redemption pattern of Christian theology" or to the "doctrinal pattern of 'creation-fall-redemption.'" Why does Brueggemann reject these other two patterns as descriptive of the Old Testament? Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
4. Brueggemann contrasts the Christian discussion of "works and grace" with "the mutuality of covenanting" in Israel's testimony. What is the difference between these two models of human transaction with God, according to Brueggemann?
5. Brueggemann implies that classical Christian theology teaches passivity and docility, rather than active and assertive engagement, as the proper response to life and to God. Based on your experience and on your encounter with Brueggemann's understanding of the Old Testament, what do you think is your "proper" relationship with God?
6. Brueggemann writes that the testimony of Israel is a life-giving alternative to one of the metanarratives of our society, which "features *scarcity*, *denial*, and *despair*, surely the ingredients of nihilism."
 - a. Brueggemann links this metanarrative to Enlightenment thought. Explain this connection.
 - b. What does the "*ideology of scarcity*" teach, according to Brueggemann, and how does it influence us and the way we live? Do you agree that this ideology is powerful in our society? Why or why not? If you can, give an example of this ideology in effect in our society. Do communities of faith participate in this ideology?

c. What does Brueggemann mean by “the Enlightenment practice of *denial*”? What does denial have to do with the healing process, according to Brueggemann? How does the church participate in society’s denial of brokenness? Do you agree that the church transposes denial into guilt? Why or why not?

d. Define nihilism. How does the belief in “the liberated, self-sufficient human agent at the center of reality” lead to despair? Do you agree that this belief, and its consequences, mark our society? Why or why not?

7. Brueggemann writes that both ancient Israel and classical Christianity believe in “*generosity* over scarcity, *brokenness* in the face of denial, and *hope* instead of despair. I want to assert only one point that is sharply at issue between these narrative offers”: the “genuinely dialectical” relationship between Yahweh and Israel, a relationship not claimed by Christianity. Explain what Brueggemann means by a “genuinely dialectical” relationship. How do ancient Israel and classical Christianity differ with regards to this one point, according to Brueggemann? How do you tend to think of and be in relationship with God with regards to this point? Why?

8. Brueggemann writes: “This testimony of Israel, echoed by Christianity, not only gives different answers—it insists on different questions, wherein the answers offered are perforce thin and tenuous, but not for that reason unuttered.” What different questions does Israel insist upon answering? What different answers does Israel give? Which answers for Israel are “perforce thin and tenuous” but still uttered? Why does Brueggemann believe that the arguments within the church and between Christians and Jews are “unconscionable”? To what extent do you agree? Why?

For Further Exploration

Read Related Articles by Walter Brueggemann:

“Ecumenism as the Shared Practice of a Peculiar Identity.” *Word & World* 18/2 (Spring 1998): 122–35, http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/18-2_Ecumenism/18-2_Brueggemann.pdf.

“The Embarrassing Footnote.” *Theology Today* 44/1 (April 1987): 5–14, <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/search/index-browse.htm>.

“Enough is Enough.” *The Other Side* 37/6 (November-December 2001): 10–13, <http://www.theotherside.org/archive/nov-dec01/brueggemann.html>.

“Entitled Neighbors: A Biblical Perspective on Living Wage.” *The Witness* 85/5 (May 2002): 18–20, <http://www.thewitness.org/menubackissue.html>.

“Hope in the Face of Loss.” *The Other Side* 35/2 (March-April 1999): 17–20, 49, <http://www.theotherside.org/archive/mar-apr99/brueggemann.html>.