

AN ON-GOING IMAGINATION

*A Conversation about Scripture, Faith,
and the Thickness of Relationship*

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

AND

CLOVER REUTER BEAL

Edited by Timothy Beal

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PREFACE

Walter Brueggemann

It strikes me that the format of the pages that follow here—a series of conversations with Clover Beal and edited by Timothy Beal—is exactly the right genre for reflection on my work. The reason an interview is the right genre is that an interview is a conversation that involves two-way interaction. In these interviews, Clover and I have been in a two-way exchange that has, I think, moved us to new insight that has involved and impacted us both.

This way of dialogic conversation has become increasingly important to me as I have come to understand more fully that dialogic modes of interaction are crucial for the way of imagining that governs the Old Testament. The text itself is articulated as an act of imagination amid a particular lived circumstance and with the God who inhabits that particular circumstance. Thus, for example, I have proposed in my *Theology of the Old Testament* that Old Testament faith is an interaction between “core testimony” and “countertestimony” that admits of no settlement.¹ In the book of Psalms, Israel’s talk with God consists of movement between praise and lament, often in the same Psalm. And behind that practice in the book of Psalms is the narrative account of Moses’ two-way interaction with YHWH “face to face” (Exod. 33:11), as exemplified in Moses’ remonstrations to YHWH in Exodus 32:11–14 and

Numbers 14:13–19. Conversely, after the book of Psalms, Job is commended by YHWH for speaking “what is right” in his shrill challenge to God (Job 42:7–8). The God of Israel invites and welcomes intense dialogic interaction that is honest and not deferential. We do well in our theological work, it follows, to replicate the kind of interaction that functions to permit new emergences, through the process of dialogue, that would not otherwise appear. Thus in these interviews, conversation with Clover has led me to fresh awarenesses about my work. I hope, moreover, that these exchanges will evoke the same for readers.

My learning about dialogic processes as a vehicle for new emergence is of course deeply rooted in rabbinic tradition. The rabbis understood that biblical texts can never be reduced to one meaning; through attentive imagination, the rabbis were able, always, to find fresh meanings in fresh readings. In recent time this “dialogic process” has been articulated and championed by Martin Buber, whose I-Thou insistence (popularly understood in facile ways) is a direct challenge to Cartesian positivism with its pursuit of a single and final certitude. Buber understood that life received from Thou and gladly given back to Thou is not a one-time happening but is an on-going process.² After Buber, moreover, Emmanuel Levinas has proposed that seeing the face of the other—a face that is constantly given new, fresh inflection—comes with fresh, nonnegotiable mandates for faithfulness.³

Through “many toils and snares,” my work is an on-going awareness that interpretation is an open-ended enterprise that must refuse fixities and final certitudes. Indeed the Jewish tradition has deeply understood that “final interpretations” will, soon or late, lead to “final solutions.” One may track current “final solutions” among us that are

variously grounded in race, nationality, gender, or class; every time such finality is rooted in a “final interpretation” of a text that allows for and anticipates no newness yet to be given. As these interviews will reflect, I am still underway in discerning how deeply such dialogic open-endedness goes and how radically it must be honored. The issue is an urgent one in an ideologically propelled cultural context in which various competing parties have arrived at finality that precludes generative newness.

The matter of fresh discernment through dialogic interaction pertains in my work to three spheres that I can readily identify. First, my long years of teaching have witnessed a revolutionary transformation of the discipline of Old Testament study. When I began my study and work, historical criticism was the only methodological option. In retrospect that approach was a particular exercise of Cartesian reasoning that sought to explain away every contradiction in the text and to resolve every ambiguity in the text. Through recent decades, however, our discipline has moved beyond that critical enterprise to what Paul Ricoeur has termed a “postcritical” stance in which, after our best criticism, we may still retrieve deep meaning from the text that has not been erased by our skepticism. The compelling outcome of that move beyond historical criticism has been the legitimation of other approaches in Old Testament study, including social-scientific, rhetorical, canonical, and reader-response. The entry of marginalized people into the interpretive process has decisively eroded the hegemony of white, male, Western interpretation. As a result white male Westerners like me are in a long-term process of playing catch-up to newer methods and perspectives, always with an awareness that texts have many meanings.

Second, while alert interpreters have always been aware of the prophetic dimension of Old Testament ethics, our preoccupation with historical specificity and the passion for literary sources and dating texts has long distracted our attention away from the realities of economic systems, political arrangements, and religious legitimations of those systems and arrangements evidenced in the text and in the communities behind the text. Perhaps in part evoked by the economic radicality of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, Old Testament study, notably led by Norman Gottwald, has moved toward systems analysis of socioeconomic systems and processes in the ancient world.⁴ We have been able to see that the “urban elites” in every ancient culture depended on the production of “subsistence peasants” for the delivery of surplus wealth that made for self-indulgent living.⁵ With that awareness about the dynamics of the text, we are much better able, from the text, to engage contemporary issues concerning the predatory economy in which we find ourselves. “Liberation theology” has been an important way station in the process of discernment of the urgent social justice issues of our own time, when attention to social justice in the text requires more than an occasional prophetic reference or an occasional “special Sunday” of proclamation. Rather, systems analysis makes clear that social justice in response to a predatory economy is central to the metanarrative of the Bible. Thus the explosion of “empire studies,” with particular reference to the work of Richard Horsley, highlights the recurring urgency of social justice issues in the text and in our contexts of reading.⁶

Third, the current crisis in the Western church raises very hard questions about the style and structure of the church, its distinctive gospel claim, and its peculiar

and subversive mission in the world. With many nuances and variations, the urgent ecclesial question now before us, I propose, is the extent to which the church can witness to the deep contradiction between the summons of biblical faith and our accommodating ways in the world, or the extent to which we do better by concealing that contradiction and making the best of partnership with “the rulers of this age.” This is the old question of “Christ and Culture,” now posed with acute intensity, an intensity that requires dialogic engagement that cannot be foreclosed by ideological certitude on behalf of any particular party. The distinctive relationality of the covenantal tradition that runs through the Bible is a happy but demanding alternative in our current context through which we may imagine the church very differently.

My own work has been, as best I am able, to read the biblical text honestly and faithfully. “Honestly” means not to avoid or bowdlerize the hard parts. “Faithfully” means to be without pretense about the quotidian reality of our bodily existence. This honesty and faithfulness leads one to focus, more sharply in recent time, on matters of social justice with a capacity to notice the “class warfare” conducted from above, and with a readiness to see clearly how dangerous and subversive is an authentic gospel church. In all these matters, I have so much to unlearn, as do some who read these words. The process of unlearning and then learning is on-going.

That process can be effective only when we have good dialogic practice through which we may learn afresh what matters most. I am grateful to Clover Beal and Tim Beal, my well-beloved students, for their readiness to be engaged with me in that demanding on-going process. Clover, Tim, and I are greatly helped in practical ways in this

matter by David Dobson and his colleagues at Westminster John Knox Press. It is my hope that these interviews will be of interest and assistance to readers who are also participants in the on-going enterprise of faithful honesty and honest fidelity.

NOTES

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

2. In a whimsical paragraph of *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), 97–98, Martin Buber reports on the Thou quality of his cat:

Sometimes I look into a cat's eyes. The domesticated animal has not as it were received from us (as we sometimes imagine) the gift of the truly "speaking" glance, but only . . . the capacity to turn its glance to us prodigious beings. But with this capacity there enters the glance, in its dawn and continuing in its rising, a quality of amazement and of inquiry that is wholly lacking in the original glance with all its anxiety. The beginning of this cat's glance, lighting up under the touch of my glance, indisputably questioned me: "Is it possible that you think of me? Do you really not just want me to have fun? Do I concern you? Do I exist in your sight? Do I really exist? What is it that comes from you? . . . The world of *It* surrounded the animal and myself, for the space of a glance the world of *Thou* had shone out from the depths, to be at once extinguished and put back into the world of *It*."

3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

4. Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 B. C. E.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1979). The immediate fulcrum of Gottwald's work was the University of California in the days of

unrest and rising social awareness about the repressions of society. Gottwald's scholarship is thick and deep, but such a context is not unimportant for his articulation of a fresh approach.

5. In *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 202–3, Roland Boer comments on the practices of surplus wealth:

The system of estates sought to deal with a very practical matter: how does one feed and clothe the nonproducers? Or rather, how does one enable the nonproducing ruling class to maintain the life to which its members had quickly become accustomed?

It is usual for us to slot the poor and marginated as the “nonproducers.” Boer rightly inverts the matter to see that the genuine nonproducers are in the ruling class.

6. See, for example, Richard A. Horsley, *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) and *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

PREFACE

Claver Reuter Beal

I discovered Walter Brueggemann's work as a sophomore in college at Seattle Pacific University. *The Bible Makes Sense* was required reading in our Introduction to the New Testament course. Raised in a "Bible-believing" church tradition, I was already schooled in love for the Bible. I had been convinced of the importance of Scriptures in shaping one's identity as a Christian, and engaging in their complexities was (mostly) encouraged during my formative years. To be sure, utilizing them in one's devotional life was essentially mandated. We were encouraged to walk with God through the reading and study of the Scriptures. Needless to say, discovering Brueggemann's work with these texts opened up a whole new world of possibilities.

When I decided to pursue seminary and ordained ministry as a Presbyterian, my college professors encouraged me to study wherever Brueggemann was teaching. That turned out to be Columbia Theological Seminary. By that time, I was married to Tim Beal, and together we set out from Seattle, Washington, to Decatur, Georgia, to begin our studies.

Our first experience of Professor Brueggemann was as a preacher. It was in a chapel service during our intensive summer Greek school. I vividly remember his sermon. His exposition of two Hebrew verbs in Isaiah brought me

to tears. I had read his books for years, yet, to be honest, I was not prepared for the profound impact his preaching and teaching would have on me. It wasn't only the brilliance of his scholarship and pedagogy but also the honesty with which he approached the text. The Scriptures clearly were texting his life, and that truth inspired me to work to communicate to mainline Presbyterians a commitment to the Scriptures that lets them shape our lives.

Tim and I were fortunate to develop a friendship with Walter over the years. His guidance and encouragement, his wisdom and care for us and our children, have moved both of us personally and professionally in ways that we cannot have imagined possible.

This book is the result of privileged opportunities I've had to engage in public conversations with Walter. It occurred to Tim and me that there were insights and reflections that Walter shared in our conversations that we had not otherwise read in his written works. We wanted to share these conversations, and the insights that emerge through them, with others. For those of you discovering the work of Walter Brueggemann for the first time, this is a terrific primer. For those who want to share Walter Brueggemann with others and need a condensed version of his thoughts on a variety of topics and themes, this will be a most helpful book.

Thank you to the members of Forest Hill Church (Presbyterian) in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, for hosting Walter Brueggemann in 2011. That visit occasioned my first opportunity for rich public conversation with him. I also thank my current church, Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church in Denver, Colorado, for giving me two more occasions to be in discussion with Walter. I thank

Tim Beal for editing these and other conversations with Walter into a compelling book.

Most importantly, I want to thank Walter for his willingness to engage in these conversations and for allowing us to share them with others. As always, I learned a great deal from his thoughts and words, and I will continue to draw out meaning from them for years to come. I have been nourished. I trust and pray this book will nourish others as well.

PARTY LINES AND CHURCH CAMPS

Early Influences

Clover Reuter Beal (CRB): I was first introduced to your work in the early 1980s while I was an undergraduate student at Seattle Pacific University. I was in an introductory course on the New Testament, and the professor, Robert Wall, assigned your book *The Bible Makes Sense*. Published in 1977, this was one of the first books you wrote that reached a broader audience, beyond scholars. In fact, people are still reading and talking about it today. To this day I remember how powerfully it moved me. I'm sure I'm not the only one who decided to go into ministry after reading it.

I was actually a Pentecostal at the time. Sadly, women in that movement are not encouraged to enter ordained ministry, especially as solo pastors. So attending a Pentecostal seminary was not my best way forward. When I asked Professor Wall for advice, he told me, wherever Walter Brueggemann is, go there.

At that time, you were at Eden Theological Seminary, a United Church of Christ (UCC) school in St. Louis, Missouri. So I thought, well, wherever and whatever that is, I'll go there and become UCC! But then, by the time I was ready to apply, you had moved to Columbia Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian (USA) school in Decatur, Georgia. So my newlywed husband, Tim

(Beal), and I applied there—*only* there, in fact. You may well be the main reason we are Presbyterians!

Working with you and other wonderful professors at Columbia was a powerfully life-changing and liberating educational experience for us. Now, two decades later, we are so grateful to have moved from a professor-student relationship then to what we feel is a real friendship, even as we continue to treasure your mentoring of us.

Of course, you have many friends and colleagues, many mentees, and a great many others who have been profoundly influenced by your work.

Speaking of mentors and influences, I want you to share more of your own story. I take it your career path as an academic was not a well-trodden one where you grew up. Were you something of an anomaly in your community?

Walter Brueggemann (WB): Yes. Nobody from my high school went to college or anything. But my dad, who was a pastor, was adamant that my brother Edward and I would go. So I was lucky to have so much support and encouragement from my parents.

CRB: And how did your mother and father meet?

WB: Dad was a young pastor serving on the staff at summer church camp, and my mother was enrolled. He was ten years older than she.

CRB: Was your mom a full-time stay-at-home mom? Did she do anything else?

WB: Oh yes, that's what she did. She had an eighth grade education. She would have been a pastor had women been able to do that. She really was an assistant pastor to our church—not by title but by function. Do you know what a party line is on the phone?

CRB: Sure—a single phone line shared by multiple households. That’s what I grew up with. Sometimes you would pick up the phone to call someone and hear a neighbor talking to someone else. So you’d hang up and try to make your call later—or at least that’s what you were supposed to do. You could also listen in!

WB: That’s right. We had a party line, so she spent many hours listening. She’d say, “Well I have to so your dad can know what to do.”

CRB: That’s pastoral care. She was helping him keep ahead of the game! When were you yourself first drawn to the ministry? Was it while you were a student at Elmhurst College, or earlier, or later?

WB: That was really when I was still in high school. My father was a mentor to many younger pastors, and they were coming through our house all the time. I thought they were the neatest people in the history of the world. I think getting to know them drew me into ministry. Every summer during high school I went to church summer camp, and these same young pastors were the staff for summer camp. So I got to be connected with them. That’s really where my interest in ministry came from.

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